MAKING WOMEN MEN: WHAT FEMALE SUPERINTENDENT STORIES TELL US ABOUT THE GENDER GAP IN THE NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY

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In the early nineteenth century, the sexual division of labor in education established women as teachers and men as leaders. With the Common Schools movement and as Taylorism was applied to the process of schooling, the position of superintendent was firmly established by the late 1800s. As women gained suffrage, they launched successful campaigns for elected superintendencies, and in 1930, women held nearly 11% of all superintendencies. In response, powerful men superintendents led successful attacks on the female leadership, halting women’s advancement into the superintendency with lasting effects over the following decades. These attacks still resonate today: even though women hold the vast majority of teacher and principal positions, women represent only 22.5% of all superintendents, and men are 20 times more likely to advance to the superintendency than women. While much has been written about the psychological factors, limited opportunities, and societal expectations that hinder women’s advancement into the superintendency, we need women’s stories to fully understand the inequity.

In this study, the researcher explored the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency by engaging in elite interviewing with 14 current female North Carolina superintendents. Using narrative analysis, the researcher examined the narrative strategy each of the 14 women superintendents employs to make meaning of her experiences in the gendered role of superintendent. Motifs across the stories were then identified to understand what women’s stories illustrate about the barriers women face in securing superintendencies. The researcher
found that unequal expectations for women’s quality of work, discriminatory working conditions, unachievable work-life balance, and inequitable pay gender the superintendency role such that it remains intentionally designed for men and consequently excludes women. Even when women defy statistics and enter the superintendency, they are forced to change their identities to become men. Instead of forcing women to become men, the researcher posits a restructuring of the superintendency role through a feminist framework to ensure a more socially just educational landscape for women.
To the light, joy of my life: my sweet girls Lucy & Reeves.

And my nieces Meredith, Allie, Cassie, Maggie, & Mary-Eller.

May you find only broken ceilings.

And should you find one yet to be,

Smash the hell out of it, heart first.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The school superintendent is arguably the most powerful employee in a school system. A superintendent works in tandem with a district’s board of education, creating local policy, implementing state board policy, hiring and directing the district’s staff, and overseeing all school curricular and managerial operations. The superintendency began in the 1830s with the advent of “free, public, ‘common’ schools” (Callahan, 1966, p.11). Until 1870, there were only 27 city superintendents, paralleling the slow growth of the public school system. Beginning in 1870, however, the role of superintendent expanded tremendously. Callahan (1966) notes that by 1915, there were 1,551 superintendents and by 1965, there were approximately 14,000 in public schools (p.11). With this growth, the number of students to be educated nearly doubled and the American school system grew in complexity. Callahan (1966) argues that the role of superintendent developed in direct response to such complexity and due to the absence of the federal government in education (p. 12). States delegated authority to local district school boards to educate. With the rapid growth of cities and schools in the late 1800s, district management by school boards became increasingly difficult, and there was a need to establish the role of superintendent who would oversee district operations for the local board (Callahan, 1966, p.28). By 1895, the office of superintendent was firmly established.

Today, there exists a significant gender gap in the superintendency, and understanding the evolution of the role provides context for gender inequity in educational leadership. In her work Destined to Rule the Schools, Blount (1998) describes the early work of the superintendent
as one responsible for the logistics of schooling, including overseeing facilities and supplies. She notes that by the 1850s, superintendents were tasked with the structuring of schools that resembled the industrial mills of America. By the late 1800s, the superintendent was applying the concept of scientific management or Taylorism to the running of schools, in which schools and its teachers were managed to maximize output. During this time, the role of school administrator grew in prestige, with specific educational pathways for administration created, higher salaries implemented, and a growing divide between the role of administrator and teacher. With the professionalization of school administration, it became difficult for women to secure positions as superintendents. Gender division between the educational workforce and the superintendency emerged from women’s difficulty in gaining admission to administrative preparation programs, attacks on women’s leadership styles as counter to the necessity of the superintendent as a manager of people and budgets, and the desire of local boards to hire men (Blount, 1998, pp. 39-60). Later, during the suffrage movement in the early 20th century, women found success in securing superintendencies. Blount (1998) notes that by 1930, women represented “28 percent of county superintendents and 11 percent of all superintendents nationwide” (p. 61). As women won the right to vote, male-dominated superintendent groups worked to change superintendencies from elected to appointed positions, arguing that the public was unable to properly choose expert administrators and that these officials should be appointed from a pool of qualified applicants. Shifting from an election to an appointment system in the superintendency effectively halted women’s progress into school leadership. As Blount (1998) explains, women “rarely” received appointments to the superintendency, as they were excluded from male political networks responsible for placing candidates (p. 85). Simultaneous to the movement to an appointment system, superintendent groups led by men actively demeaned and belittled the
current state of the county superintendency, in which women were largely represented to justify reforms to the way these officials secured their positions.

These efforts led by men to reform the superintendency had a tremendous and lasting impact on shifting the role of superintendent to one held almost entirely by men. Tellerico & Blount (2004) compiled statistics on superintendents by gender from 1910 to 1998, showing that the percentages of women in the role was the same in 2000 as it was a century earlier. In their data collection, Tellerico & Blount (2004) identified three patterns. First, they explain that the superintendency was an overwhelmingly male occupation during the entire 19th century, with men representing from 85 to nearly 96% throughout the entire century. Second, they identify a “wave in the longitudinal data” from 1910 to 1970, in which women began to enter the superintendency. During this time period, the percentage of women in the superintendency peaked at 11% in 1930 but then reversed to “extreme segregation by sex” in 1970 with women representing just 3% of all superintendents (p.640). The authors identify a third pattern between 1970 and 1998 in which women again re-entered the superintendency. During this most recent time period, women increased from an overall of three percent in 1970 to a high of 10% in 1998 (p.640). More recent data regarding women in the superintendency show an encouraging change from the stagnant trend of the 20th century. Dowell & Larwin (2013) note research supports a current percentage of female superintendents to be in a range from 12% to 22% (p. 54). In their report of current superintendents in the nation, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) report in 2018, women represented 22.5% of their superintendent respondents (Finnan & McCord, 2018, p.10). The authors note overall, the longitudinal data throughout the 20th and 21st centuries represent a consistently low percentage of women in the superintendency.
Problem Statement

While this increase in female superintendents represents progress in achieving gender equity, there still exists a significant underrepresentation of women in the superintendency, especially when compared to the percentage of women in the educational workforce, the percentage of women enrolled in educational administration programs, and the percentage of women with superintendent certification (Glass, 2000, “Where are all the women superintendents,” para.3). Considering the longitudinal data on women in the superintendency, in order for women to reach parity with men in the school superintendency it would take until the year 2035 at the current rate of increase (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, p.54). Additionally, while women have made strides in earning educational leadership positions, there is a significantly high percentage of female superintendent candidates who are not moving into the superintendency. While women make up “more than half” of educational administration doctoral students, women only occupy one-fourth of the administrative positions in the workforce (Glass, 2000, Lack of credentials section, para.1). Also, Glass (2000) notes that only 10% of women earn the superintendent certificate along with their specialist or doctoral degree (Lack of credentials section, para.1). Even at this low percentage, state certification agencies report that more women are certified or licensed to serve as superintendents than men (Dowell & Larwin, 2013, p.59).

In the state of North Carolina (NC) where the researcher conducted her study, there is a similarly alarming gender gap in the school superintendency. While the majority of teachers and principals in the state are women, the vast majority of superintendents are men. The most recent report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) shows the NC teaching force is 78.9% women. At the time of this study’s research, the NC Department of Public Instruction
(2018) reported that 59.8% of the 2,449 principals in NC public schools were women (2017-18 Education directory, 2018). Of the 111 full-time, non-interim superintendents, just 26, or a mere 23.4%, were women (2017-18 Directory of superintendents, 2018). These data represent a gap of nearly 56% between the gender of the NC teaching force and the school superintendency and a gap of 37% between the principalship and the superintendency. This glaring disparity requires questioning: if the personnel pipeline that feeds into the role of superintendent in NC is overwhelmingly female, why are there so few female superintendents? While the percentage of female superintendents has risen in recent years, the still low percentage in the role juxtaposed to the number of women in the field and those qualified for the position requires investigation.

**Importance of the Problem**

The gender gap in the superintendency requires critical examination for two important reasons. First, the underrepresentation of women is an issue of continued discrimination against women in the workplace. Prior to the 1960s, the norm in American culture was for women to enter the workforce and remain there until they were married, at which time they would leave their positions to serve as wives and mothers (Guy & Fenley, 2014, p. 40). The feminist movement of the 1960s brought a radical stance in which women fought for restructuring of society that would provide more equitable opportunities in the workforce (Guy & Genley, 2014, p.42). The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was monumental in correcting social inequity. The legislation included provisions that protect the rights of minorities, stating that discrimination cannot occur based on race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin. Title VII of the legislation deals specifically with equal employment opportunities and specifies that sex is a protected class against which employers cannot discriminate. While Title VII addressed discrimination against women in the workplace, it only prohibited “outright and blatant
discrimination,” leaving women subject to workplace discrimination embedded into workplace practices and organizational norms (Guy & Genley, 2014, p.44). The 1971 Supreme Court decision in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* determined that Title VII protected employees against disparate impact, outlining that inequality in outcomes can provide evidence of discrimination, even if there is no intentional discrimination in treatment (Guy & Genley, 2014, p.49). Applying the theory of disparate impact, the gender gap between the educational workforce and the superintendency represents an issue of discrimination. As Glass (2000) notes, there are data to suggest that women have largely overcome the structural barriers excluding them from the superintendency including licensure and graduation from advanced degree programs (Glass, 2000, Lack of credentials section, para.1). Accordingly, the still low percentage of female superintendents suggests that there exist other barriers to attainment of the superintendency by females. While the percentage of women in the superintendency may not be caused by disparate treatment, the disparity between the educational workforce represented overwhelmingly by women and the superintendency represented overwhelmingly by men suggests that discrimination against women in attaining the superintendency is a continued reality.

The second reason the gender gap in the NC superintendency must be examined is that women are prepared to lead complicated organizations such as educational systems, and it is critical to our school systems there is strong, consistent leadership at the helm. In their research on the demands of the 21st century superintendent, Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2010) found that the turnover in the superintendency has increased dramatically, with an average tenure of just five to six years in the role. Also, the authors note there will be “substantial turnover” in the next five years, with almost half of all superintendents leaving their positions permanently (Career Intentions section, para.2). Because effective leadership is pivotal
to ensuring students’ needs are appropriately met, the upcoming leadership vacancies in the superintendency provide opportunity for women educators to fill such roles. As women represent nearly 80% of the teaching work force and more than half of school principals, there are women with direct leadership experience in the field to fill these positions. In addition to the sheer number of prepared women leaders who could potentially fill upcoming superintendent vacancies, research on transformational leadership suggests that women often possess the leadership characteristics necessary for leading and effecting change in large, complicated systems. As Malone (1999) explains, the role of superintendent today requires a change agent who can consistently adapt to various social, economic, and political conditions (p.61). Transformational leaders work to establish trust of staff and motivate them to improve performance for the benefit of a common goal or vision (Bass, 1998, p.62). As Eagly (2003) explains, female leaders are often transformational, with the emotional and interpersonal skills of transformational leaders often related to feminine gender roles (p.151). Of course, characteristics of transformational leadership are not limited to women leaders; however, in considering the number of trained women educational leaders and the needs of leading in the 21st century superintendency, it is vital to the health of school systems to ensure women become superintendents. Accordingly, not only is re-framing educational practice through feminism important for ensuring employment discrimination ends, it also serves to benefit schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

There were three purposes of the study achieved through narrative analysis of women superintendent stories. First, this research sought to give and value female superintendents’ voices. Female superintendents have overcome significant obstacles to attain their positions and engage in these roles in male-dominated arenas. Their experiences are the best indicators of
challenges women face in advancing in the field. Capturing and presenting their stories not only served to identify barriers women face to and in the superintendency, but it equally sought to acknowledge and represent their experiences with gender issues. Second, the researcher sought to examine how each woman superintendent makes meaning of her leadership. After capturing each of 14 female superintendents’ stories through one-on-one elite interviewing, the researcher analyzed each leadership story to identify the narrative strategy employed by the superintendent in the meaning-making process. Lastly, this research served to identify the barriers women experience in their ascension to and in the superintendent role. Because the barriers to the superintendency are discrete, nuanced, and difficult to identify, such barriers cannot be eradicated until they are described. By analyzing the motifs across the narrative strategies employed by the 14 female superintendents, the researcher identified factors gendering the superintendency.

**Research Question**

The researcher examined a research question that is theoretical, focused on a particular population, and is site-specific. To answer the research question, the researcher interviewed 14 current female superintendents in NC. Through elite interviewing with these women and engaging in narrative analysis of their leadership stories, the researcher set out to examine how the educational landscape perpetuates gender inequality. The women who were interviewed through this study each have intimate, firsthand experiences with the barriers to the superintendency. The researcher aimed to understand how their experiences provide insight on the nuances and intricacies of the gendered pathway to the superintendency. Specifically, the researcher sought to answer the following research question: *What do women superintendent stories tell us about the gender gap in the NC superintendency?*
Elite Interviewing and Narrative Analysis

To examine the gender gap in the superintendency, the researcher conducted elite interviews with 14 current female superintendents in NC. The sample of 14 superintendents represents more than half, or 52%, of the all NC female superintendents. In this process, the researcher used questioning to seek women’s stories of attaining and engaging in the school superintendency. These stories were then analyzed using narrative analysis methodology, focusing specifically on the content of the stories women superintendents told. Allen (2017) explains that thematic narrative analysis examines the “substance of narratives” to understand various motifs present (p.1069). Upon coding and analyzing each woman’s narrative strategy, the researcher examined how each superintendent makes meaning of her experiences in a gendered leadership role. Then, after analysis of each leadership story, the researcher examined the motifs present across the 14 leadership stories to understand what women’s stories illustrate about the gender gap in the NC superintendency. These motifs then serve to add to the literature on the gender gap while also providing opportunity for changing the educational landscape so it is more inclusive for women educators.

Feminist Theoretical Framework

The researcher approached this study using a feminist theoretical framework. This framework places gender relations at the center while recognizing the “multiple intersectionalities of identity” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.28). As Marshall (1997) explains in her work Feminist Critical Policy Analysis, feminist theory serves to “uncover cultural and institutional sources or forces of oppression” (p.12). Its approach uses “women’s realities and voices from the counterpublics, the silenced, the non-events, the meaning-making” in order to “provide the lenses and tools for discovering and disrupting modes of oppression” (Marshall,
1997, p.11). Authors Marshall and Andre-Bechely (2008) explain that feminism challenges the historical power and influence of patriarchy in education (p.283). Specifically, the researcher in this study analyzed women female superintendent stories using a framework that examines how normalization of gender roles perpetuates the gender gap in the NC superintendency and how women behave like men to attain and survive in the superintendency (Butler, 1988; Skrla, 2003). In using this framework, the researcher seeks to give women voice and power in re-conceptualizing the superintendency role.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study existed due to its approach. While the data collection process of conducting elite interviewing of female superintendents provided rich data on the ways women make meaning of their leadership, the researcher interviewed women who have been successful in securing the superintendency. This scope limits the stories of women who have faced barriers powerful enough to keep them from the role. Additionally, elite interviewing was an extensive process requiring a significant time commitment from participants. In her explanation of narrative inquiry, Bell (2002) notes that the “time commitment” required for this research “makes it unsuitable for work with a large number of participants” (p.210). While such an extensive process gave voice to women, the process likewise limited the sample size of women who were interviewed for the data collection. Additionally, because superintendents are incredibly busy, it likewise limited the amount of time the participants could devote to the interview process.

There was also limitation in the researcher’s absence of analyses of the intersectionality of women’s identities in consideration of gender, race, and sexual orientation. Because priority for this study was placed on participants’ identification as women and participants were
categorized as such, considerations of the various intersections of their identities were not the primary focus on data analysis for understanding the barriers women face in seeking the superintendency and, accordingly, the identified conclusions do not fully consider how the intersection of various forms of identity advantage or disadvantage superintendent candidates. First, in terms of gender, categorization of participants as women limited considerations of gender fluidity. Second, in considering race, while there were women of color included in this study and the researcher did examine how each of these women’s narrative strategy allowed her to make meaning of racism in the role of superintendent, this study’s conclusions did not focus specifically on considerations of racism. Data on superintendents of color show a need for such examination, as the most recent survey of superintendents by AASA found that just 6.7% of their respondents were people of color (Finnan & McCord, 2018, p.10). Lastly, in considering sexual orientation, the researcher did not ask participants to share this aspect of their identity and no participant openly shared such information. This absence limits analyses of how superintendent candidates’ sexual orientations may limit their advancement. Additionally, the most recent survey of superintendents by AASA did not include any information about their respondents’ sexual orientation, showing a need for examination. Because the researcher sought to understand barriers all women face in advancing into the superintendency with constraints of time in a qualitative approach, the researcher did not specifically examine the issues of discrimination resulting from various intersectionalities of identity. Accordingly, the researcher acknowledges that this limitation hindered the approach of the study, as it does not specifically acknowledge the barriers superintendent candidates face based on the complexities of their identities and instead envelopes their experiences in the larger categorization of gender discrimination.
Closing

Researching the inequities that lead to the gender gap in the school superintendency allows for changes to ensure a more equitable educational landscape. Through elite interviews with current female superintendents and examination of their stories through narrative analysis, the researcher set out to examine how the educational landscape is gendered such that the role of superintendency continues to be reserved specifically for men. The results of this research illuminate the ways current practice limits women from attaining the superintendency. In addition to informing practice, the results of this research adds to knowledge about barriers to the superintendency for females and helps expand the current literature of gender inequity in education.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

While the majority of teachers and principals in the state of NC are women, the school superintendency continues to be dominated by men. This chapter examines four components of study that provide historical, social, and political context for inequality in the NC superintendency. First, the researcher examines the historical sexual division of labor in early education, including the professionalization of educational administration. Second, an examination of the history of the superintendency and women’s involvement is provided. Third, research on the psychological factors, limited opportunities, and societal expectations that keep women from the superintendency are reviewed. Next, the nature of the 21st century superintendency and research on transformational leadership is presented as a way for understanding how women in leadership provides benefits for educational communities. After a review of the historical, social, and political context for inequality in the superintendency, the researcher presents a feminist theoretical framework to reimagine the superintendency.

Part I: Sexual Division of Labor in Education

To investigate the current gender gap in the superintendency, it is critical to understand the historical events that have led to the sexual division of labor in education. Tallerico & Blount (2004) write that sexual division of labor is one of the most enduring and universal characteristics of work. It occurs in three forms: one form reflects a separation of the private and public worlds, with women predominating in household environments; a second form exists where either one or the other sex makes up almost the entire population of paid employees in a
particular kind of work; and the third form includes the stratification by sex within the same work setting. By examining women’s entry into the educational field against the professionalization of educational administration as a male role, the researcher elucidates how historical events created conditions for continued sexual division of labor in the field of educational leadership.

**Women as teachers.**

An examination of women’s entry into the American school system provides context for understanding both historical and persisting structures of gender inequality. During the American colonial period, the first women enrolled in school in 1761 for assimilation. These women were Native Americans enrolled in Eleazar Wheelock’s school, and the decision was made to educate women to civilize the Native Americans. As Spring (2011) writes, “Conversion to the way of life that colonial New England required...called for the creation of a nuclear household with the husband in charge and the wife doing domestic chores” (p. 28). For colonial families, there existed a strict hierarchy in which the father was leader. Women were subservient to their husbands and had no legal rights within the marriage (Spring, 2011, p. 28). Regardless of their subservience, women were still responsible for their own salvation, which created the necessity for women to be able to read. Educating women to read in the colonial family was strictly for religious purposes, and women had the responsibility to teach reading of the Bible within the household. These factors propelled women to become neighborhood teachers in the dame schools and the district schools of New England (Spring, 2011, p. 39). Although their education was limited in scope and purpose, the responsibility to teach reading led to women’s dominance in the role of public school teacher in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Spring, 2011, p. 42-43).
The American Revolution changed the way women's responsibilities were perceived. In her work *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Norton (1980) explains that during colonial times, a woman’s role in the household was not connected to the public sphere and instead focused on religious salvation and service to the family. She explains that after the Revolution, Americans began to view women as responsible in developing republic citizens (p.297). This new concept, known as republican motherhood, led to more educational opportunities for women. After the Revolution, more schools began to educate girls and in more subjects (Spring, 2011, p.142).

With the education of girls came a change in women’s status. Charity schools began to hire female graduates as teachers, and women began to see teaching as a career opportunity. Norton (1980) writes, “Teaching was the first profession opened to women on a regular basis, and as such it attracted...a large number of intellectually aware young women, many of them products of the republican academies” (p.293). During this time, teacher education began to focus on educating women for the profession. One of the first teacher preparation programs in the U.S. was the Troy Female Seminary, opened by Emma Willard in 1821. The purpose of her teacher preparation program was to ensure implementation of republican motherhood. In 1819, Willard stated in an address to the New York legislature, “Who knows how great and good a race of men may yet arise from the forming hands of mothers, enlightened by the bounty of that beloved country--to defend her liberties, to plan her future improvements and to raise her to unparalleled glory?” (Spring, 2011, p.143). As women began to enter the teaching workforce, their purpose was not for their own professional benefit but rather to prepare men for greatness.

The Common Schools movement of the 1830s expanded educational opportunity for children with the purpose of remedying social, political, and economic problems (Spring, 2011,
In his work *Pillars of the Republic*, Kaestle (1983) describes the goal of the Common Schools movement and the important role of women in the movement. He explains that the purpose of the common school was to enforce Protestant Anglo-American culture and values (p.103). In Protestant ideology, one of the crucial roles of women was in raising children, specifically in developing the “political and moral well-being of the nation” which led to the recruitment of women as teachers during the Common Schools movement (Spring, 2011, p.144). Also, women were used as teachers in common schools because they were cheaper to employ.

In addition to hiring female teachers to employ republican motherhood, the Common Schools movement focused on morality. Mattingly (1975) writes that the chief concern of the Common Schools movement was the development of children’s moral character. He explains that as women began to be educated, schools sought them out as teachers because of the belief they were inherently moral. The teacher was to serve as the perfect example of moral virtue, influencing her students so they would imitate her character. Because the Common Schools reformers sought to reform society, it was expected that the teacher was of ideal moral character (Spring, 2011, p.143-144).

This emphasis on moral character during the Common Schools movement had a lasting impression on the teaching profession still present today. Teachers were expected to be of ideal moral character; accordingly, their lives were under public scrutiny and teachers were expected to live exemplary lives (Spring, 2011, p.144). Elsbree (1939) writes in *The American Teacher: Evolution of a Profession in a Democracy*, “The teacher’s private life has always been open to public scrutiny like a goldfish in a glass bowl….and the restrictions placed upon their conduct have been many and varied” (p.296). In his Fourth Annual Report (1840) to the Massachusetts State Board of Education, Horace Mann spoke about the ideal characteristics of teachers for the
common school. The five characteristics included: 1) “perfect” knowledge of the subjects; 2) an aptitude for teaching; 3) the ability to manage and govern a schoolroom and to mold moral character; 4) “good behavior”; and 5) “morals.” Specific to the characteristic of morals, Mann stated that teachers were to have “pure tastes,” “good manners,” and to be “clothed from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot in garments of virtue” (p.47). The following year in 1841, the Boston Board of Education wrote about the changing workforce in the district. The report noted that the number of male teachers had decreased by 33 while the number of female teachers had increased by 103. The report justified this increase with three reasons. First, it stated that women were better teachers because they have natural child-rearing talents. Second, it stated that women can concentrate on teaching because they have no other possibilities of employment. Third, the report argues that women are of “purer morals” (p.47). Spring (2011) writes that this control of the teacher’s social life contributed to “the low status of teaching as a profession” (p.147). As women were limited to teaching and were likewise expected to be of ideal moral character with their lives scrutinized, women continued to be controlled by men even in their movement into the workforce.

With the emphasis of the Common Schools movement in employing women as teachers, there was a significant increase in the number of female teachers. Prior to the Civil War, the increase varied in each state. In some states, such as Connecticut, New Jersey, and Vermont, women became the majority of the teaching force. With the beginning of the Civil War, the percentage of female teachers in other states increased dramatically, including in Ohio, New York, and Iowa. With the significant increase in women in the teaching profession, Spring (2011) writes that there was “ample evidence that female teachers made education less
expensive” with other common workers earning “50 to 100 percent” more than the average salary of teachers (p.146).

Understanding women’s early role in education is vital in understanding the complexities of gender inequality that still exist in education today. Prior to the 1830s, women were legally and socially subservient to men and the purpose of their education was simply for personal religious salvation. They served as important reading teachers to their own children and some became teachers of children in their towns. With the Common Schools movement in the 1830s, women became teachers in a more formalized, professional way, with opportunities to go to the academy, attend teaching preparation programs, and become a teacher. The reformers of the Common Schools movement sought women specifically for the belief in their natural child-rearing abilities and morality. The common school emphasized the role of female teachers in teaching boys to be moral contributors to the republic and women’s role as teachers was directly linked to the success of the nation. Spring (2011) writes about the complexities of the advent of women in the teaching profession: “Women, as republican mothers and vessels of virtue, were considered the ideal teachers for a system of schooling that emphasized moral development. However, the second-class citizenship of women and the low salaries in teaching contributed to the generally low status of teaching as a profession in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (146-147). While recruitment of women into the teaching profession increased their educational and career opportunities, the purpose of doing so was for the benefit of maintaining hegemony. With low pay and high moral accountability, the teaching profession was another mechanism for the control of women while benefiting men. This history of women’s first entry into education lays a foundational understanding of gender inequality in the profession and illustrates how many of these values continue today.
Men as leaders.

The overrepresentation of men in educational leadership can be understood through an examination of the professionalization of education administration in the American school system during the 19th and 20th centuries. With the feminization of the teaching profession came the advent of administrators in schools. As women ascended into the role of teacher to employ the notion of republican motherhood, Blount (1998) writes that local and state officials created the domain of school administration which “from the beginning” was established for men. While women were to mother in the classroom, male administrators were hired to act as institutional “husbands” and “fathers” (p.26). Male administrators first appeared as school supervisors, which manifested with varying roles in different types of schools and districts. Blount (1998) notes that in the first urban schools, these school supervisors were established to administer student exams and to evaluate teachers’ pedagogical techniques. As urban schools and districts began to establish multiclassroom, graded schools, the employment of the male principal teacher or full-time principal became common primarily to manage student discipline (p.27). In rural schools where school houses largely remained as single classrooms led by women, these male supervisors, sometimes called superintendents, made rounds to each school house, observing and certifying teachers.

As the roles of woman-as-teacher and man-as-administrator became established, likewise came the leadership of Fredrick W. Taylor and his concept of scientific management in the early 19th century. In his theory, Taylor believed that allowing workers autonomy to make decisions led to inefficiency. Instead, he argued that a systematic organization of each job would produce control and maximize output (as cited in Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2011, p.65). In an address Taylor gave to the Cleveland Advertising Club in 1915, Taylor explained that scientific management
required a “complete mental revolution on the part of the workmen” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.68). This mental revolution was due to the fundamental difference between scientific management and previous work, which focused on management practices. Taylor (1915) stated, “The greatest source of gain under scientific management comes from the new and almost unheard-of duties and burdens which are voluntarily assumed, not by the workmen, but by the men on the management side” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.69). Through the remainder of his speech, Taylor described the four “burdens” of this new management for the purpose of “doubling output” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.69). The first principle is the “deliberate gathering together of the great mass of traditional knowledge” by management (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.69). Taylor explained that, historically, this task was undertaken by the workmen. By gathering together this knowledge, management can “record it, tabulate it, reduce it in most cases to rules, laws, and...mathematical formulae” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.69). In doing so, Taylor believed that each job was a set of rules to simply be executed by the workmen. The second principle of scientific management is the “scientific selection of the workman” and his development (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.70). Taylor argued that selection of the workman was critical to the organization’s efficiency. It was the duty of management to “take a great deal of trouble in selecting the workmen” and “to set out deliberately to train the workmen...to be able to do a better and still better class of work than ever before” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.70). Through selection and training, Taylor believed that the workmen would be more efficient and create more output. The third principle of scientific management is the “bringing together of science and...the trained workmen” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.70). In his speech, Taylor explained that his choice in the word “bringing” is deliberate. He does not mean that management is simply responsible for training
the workmen; rather, he explains in detail that it is the job of management to reward those who succeed and punish those who do not. The fourth and final principle of scientific management is the “complete re-division of the work of the establishment” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.70). Under scientific management, the work is divided into “two large sections” with “one of those sections...handed over to the management” (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.70). Taylor explained that this division is a form of “democracy, co-operation” in which the workmen rely on the preparation of management. Taylor’s four principles of scientific management had a significant impact on the professionalizing of educational administration. The division of labor between management and workers, selection and training of workers for particular jobs, scientific study and control of organizational work, and cost-efficiency and output all became part of educational management in the 20th century. During this time, school administrators established standardization in evaluations, records, and hiring, and cost-effectiveness became an important value in decision-making.

With the values of cost-effectiveness and scientific management introduced in the management of schools came the introduction of specialized training for school administrators. Graduate schools began to see an increase in the number of degrees earned for specialized training in school administration. In his work Education and the Cult of Efficiency, Callahan (1962) writes that in 1924, Columbia University's Teachers College conferred a third of its degrees in administration and supervision. The content of the administrative programs reflected the values of scientific management, with an emphasis on “purely executive, organizational, and legal aspects on administration” and little focus on educational problems or philosophy (p.27). Callahan (1962) explains that there was a shared belief in educational administration that management was of chief concern. A survey from the 1930s revealed professors of
administration and superintendents of city schools ranked the following items from most to least important to an administrator’s work: school finance, business administration, organization and administration of supervision, organization and supervision of the curriculum, administration of teaching personnel, public relations and publicity and organization of schools and system (p.27). The tenets of scientific management had a significant impact on how schools were run and greatly influenced administrator training, selection, and leadership style.

Understanding the principles of Taylorism and its lasting effects on school administration is critical in understanding the imbalance of power in modern education. Callahan (1962) argues that scientific management in school management caused educational leaders to abandon the role of educational philosopher and curriculum leader. In his work *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, Tyack (1974) notes that the move was a deliberate one by “administrative progressives” to ensure they “gained substantive power” (p.128). He writes that through the implementation of scientific management, the new breed of administrators joined the ranks of civic elites to ensure that educational reform took place “from the top down” (p.128). Tyack (1974) argues that school boards intentionally appointed administrators who reflected their business values. Accordingly, a “symbiotic relationship developed between the new breed of school administrators and the elite school boards” (Spring, 2011, p.277). Within this relationship came a development of roles. School boards were to establish policy, and administrators were to administer those policies without interference from the board. Spring (2011) explains that the management of schools focused on efficiency:

The concerns of the new educational administrators and elite school boards matched the general educational rhetoric about social efficiency and the development of human capital. In one sense, the administrative progressives became the new social engineers, organizing and directing a school system that would produce measured and standardized workers for the labor market, much as factories standardized products. p.278
The scientific management of schools produced power and control for elites, with those in management focusing on the standardization of workers for efficiency. As Taylor (1915) explained, this new form of management took decision-making and critical thinking away from the worker and placed it with the manager (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.68).

Standardization of hiring and pedagogy became central to producing teachers.

**Sexual division of labor.**

Recruitment of female teachers during the Common Schools movement and the professionalization of educational administration in scientific management established a sexual division of labor in the American school system that continues to exist today. Tallerio & Blount (2004) write that the sexual division of labor in “PreK-12 American schooling…[where] males dominate administrative leadership roles overall…[and] females far outnumber males in teaching” (p.634). This sexual division of labor has created specific gender roles and power differentiations in education, as evidenced in the gender gap in the superintendency.

Along with the sexual division of labor came a redistribution of power, distinctly divided along the line between teacher and administrator. With the sexual division of labor often comes differential treatment and unequal consequences. Tallerico & Blount (2004) note that for women, these consequences can include “lower pay and status, fewer opportunities for advancement, deskilling or devaluing of the labor itself, subordination to males, and exclusion from men’s work realms” (p.634). With the emergence of male administrators in the mid-1800s, teachers began to lose “autonomy, status, and authority” (Blount, 1998, p.31). The Common Schools movement established women as ideal teachers due to their natural child-rearing skills, and the movement to scientific management of schools in the early 20th century created school leadership positions that were believed to be best suited for men. Blount (1998) argues that it “was not
coincidental” that teachers’ independence and decision-making powers were “stripped away” as the teaching profession became largely female (p.37). She writes that male educators during this time had to “assert their masculine qualities” by becoming administrators in control of the women, “just as fathers and husbands long had done in the home” (p.37). Blount notes that the role of administrator became ubiquitous only when women began filling teaching positions. Simultaneously, as teaching became dominated by women, school became more formalized. Strober and Tyack (1980) explain this formalization manifested as “longer school years, state standards for funding, more professional and intrusive supervision, a decrease in the female/male salary ratio, uniform curriculum and certification regulations” (p.499). This formalization came in direct response to women’s dominance in the classroom and a desire for men’s “control” (p.499). The sexual division of labor in education was firmly established, with women as teachers “controlled by men” (Blount, 1998, p.37).

**Part II: The History of the Female Superintendent**

As this study seeks to understand the gender gap in the superintendency, it is vital to understand the history of the female superintendent. This section reviews women’s complicated relationship with the superintendency and its impact on the current gender gap. Included in this section are three parts: the establishment of the superintendency, women’s movement into the superintendency, women’s movement out of the superintendency, and the current superintendent gender gap.

**The establishment of the superintendency.**

With the formalization of schools and advent of school administration during the mid-1800s, a variety of superintendency roles emerged to manage a myriad of school functions.
These superintendencies varied across the nation and included state, county, district and city positions, all of which were dominated by men.

In the early 19th century, communities elected local commissioners or board members to maintain responsibility of their local schools, most importantly to levy taxes on their communities to fund them. Because the management of schools required more work than unpaid local school boards wanted to take on, they began to hire supervisors or district superintendents to execute their administrative work (Blount, 1998, p.41). While some of these district superintendents had teaching experience, local school boards often hired men without teaching experience “simply to establish some oversight of the teachers’ work” (Blount, 1998, p.44). These districts could not pay their superintendents much and many left seeking higher salaries in county or state superintendencies. As Cubberley (1914) notes, this led to a lack of prestige associated with small school districts and many collapsed into larger county units (pp. 10-13).

Some communities refused to tax themselves to fund schools; accordingly, advocates argued for states to take control of their schools. By the end of the 19th century, the Common School movement had established control, leading to the dominance of state-regulated public schools in the U.S. (Blount, 1998, p.41). With states gaining control of funding their schools, the position of state superintendent was established with the primary function of distributing state land and funds. Additionally, state superintendents traveled to “explain school laws…urge compliance” and convince “reluctant taxpayers” to fund schools (Blount, 1998, p.42). Blount notes with the establishment of states funding their schools, state superintendents’ time was also demanded by politicians who worked closely with them in education legislation.

As the state superintendent role became more demanding, county superintendencies were established to assist state superintendents. Originally, the primary role of county superintendents
was to oversee “distribution of state funds and…local school compliance with state laws” (Blount, 1998, p.42). Blount (1998) explains that through the first quarter of the 20th century, the role of the county superintendent gained significant power as additional responsibilities were granted to them. The role of county superintendent evolved to include examining and training teachers and establishing requirements for teacher licensure. They also assumed responsibility of “adjusting school district lines” as communities changed. In most states, state superintendents were elected by eligible county voters. From its inception, the position was dominated by men, generally with no experience with schools (Blount, 1998, pp.43-44).

City superintendencies were established in the same manner as small rural districts; they were generally hired by unpaid local school boards elected to oversee their district schools. Blount (1998) notes that city superintendencies differed from district roles due to American industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (p.45). With the nation’s movement from agriculture to industry, cities experienced a rapid explosion of school-age children. In turn, city superintendents found themselves inundated with the business of educating these students. Blount (1998) writes that city superintendents were now responsible for constructing multiclassroom school buildings, purchasing textbooks, and hiring and training teachers (p.45). Due to rapid expansion, city superintendents had to be more innovative, making the city superintendency more prestigious. With the demands of their jobs, city superintendents began to establish central offices with personnel to aid in management. These positions were paid “considerably more” than teachers and were filled by men (Blount, 1998, p.46).

**Women’s movement into the superintendency.**

As the position of superintendent was established throughout the 19th century, it was dominated by men, and superintendents were either elected or appointed to their positions by
local school boards. Because women did not have the right to vote nor could they hold public office, elected superintendents were men. As Blount (1998) notes, it was extremely difficult for women to be appointed to the superintendency by local boards. Board members tended to appoint superintendents that mirrored their own demographics, which meant they almost always chose white, Protestant men (p.68).

As women began the fight for suffrage in the 1800s, teachers played an active and important role in its movement (Blount, 1998, p.63). Female teacher advocates began to argue two important points relating to their work in education. First, because teachers earned salaries, they sometimes purchased property. Women argued property owners should be entitled to vote, so women property owners should have suffrage (Blount, 1998, p.65). Second, female teacher advocates argued they should be able to vote for elected school officials such as superintendents. Because they were school employees, they reasoned they should have a voice in choosing the officials that oversee them. With most teachers being female without the right to vote, they claimed they had no control of their working conditions (Blount, 1998, p.66). These arguments from women teacher advocates for suffrage were effective, and some states began to pass legislation granting women limited voting rights on school matters. As Blackwell (1912) notes, by 1910, “twenty-four states had granted women school suffrage” (p.74). Suffrage advocates continued to push for the right to vote in all matters, and individual states slowly began to grant women’s enfranchisement, with Wyoming as the first state to grant women’s suffrage in 1869 (Blount, 1998, p.66). Advocates also argued women should be legally allowed to run for public office, and individual states slowly added these rights to women.

With women’s suffrage and the right to hold office came a change in the superintendency. Blount (1998) writes, “Once women could vote and then run for school offices,
they started winning” (p.67). Women first began winning elected county superintendencies. In Illinois, ten women won county superintendencies in 1873, the first year women had suffrage in the state. In Colorado, a decade after women won suffrage in 1893, the majority of county superintendents were women (Blount, 1998, p.69). By 1910, when around a half million American women worked in education, women represented approximately 8.9% of all superintendents (U.S. Office of Education, 1921, p.10). The 1917 Woman Suffrage Yearbook declared in that year more than half of the county superintendencies in the U.S. were held by women and 17 women served as state superintendents (p.166). By 1930, women accounted for almost 28% of county superintendents and 11% of all superintendents across the nation (Blount, 1998, p.61). These gains in female leadership were noted by Ella Flagg Young when she became the first woman superintendent of Chicago. She predicted these achievements were simply the beginning and “[w]omen [were] destined to rule the schools of every city…. [and i]n the near future…[there would be] more women than men in executive charge” (“The highest salaried,” 1909, p.515). Women were gaining momentum and movement into the superintendency, on track to take over the roles of top leadership in a workforce largely represented by women.

**Women’s movement out of the superintendency.**

With women’s movement into the superintendency came a threat to male dominance. As women earned suffrage, groups of men superintendents pushed for reforms in how superintendents were chosen. As women gained the right to vote in the late 19th century, a group of male superintendents had formed The Department of Superintendence as part of the National Educational Association (NEA) (White, 1901, p.233). Because women were entering the superintendency almost entirely through the election process after the 1930s, The Department of Superintendence led an effort to change the superintendency to a strictly appointed position. The
men’s group first worked to change the narrative of what the role of superintendent required, adopting the concept of superintendent as an expert manager of people chiefly concerned with efficiency. This was directly related to the advent of Taylorism in the process of schooling. With this narrative, the Department of Superintendence argued the public “could not be trusted to recognize and choose expert talent” (Blount, 1998, p.82). They argued an appointment system would allow for credentialed candidates and would “take the position out of politics” (Blount, 1998, p.83). Also, The Department of Superintendence waged an attack against county superintendent positions, the very positions that women were winning through elections. The NEA portrayed county superintendents as “unskilled political hacks” who did not hold the same academic training in educational administration as their district superintendent counterparts (Blount, 1998, p.86). Simultaneously, male superintendents heaped praise and reverence on city superintendent positions which were appointed by local school boards and received higher salaries (Blount, 1998, p.86). Not coincidentally, these positions were virtually all held by men.

Unfortunately, this attack on women’s advancement into the superintendency by organized male superintendents was effective. By 1951, an NEA bulletin noted “many states have changed the traditional election [of county superintendents] by popular vote to appointment by the county board” (Blount, 1998, p.85). Over the next twenty years with the superintendent largely an appointed position, women effectively vanished from school leadership. As Blount (1998) notes, women were rarely appointed to superintendencies because they “tended to be excluded from the male political networks responsible for placing most superintendent candidates” (p.85). Also, school boards evolved during this time, with virtually all boards members representing “[w]ealth[ier] members of the community” who were generally local businessmen and professionals (Blount, 1998, p.83). In addition, the narrative of the NEA to
appoint only “expert” superintendents who held professional training in school administration essentially eliminated women in the superintendency candidate pool, as women did not hold these credentials because they were not allowed admission into training programs. Accordingly, local wealthy school board members appointed “expertly” trained men in school administration. Blount (1998) outlines that from 1930 to 1950, women represented between 9 and 11% of all superintendents. Then, beginning in 1950, there was a dramatic decrease of female superintendents, to a low of 3% nationwide in 1970 and slightly less than 4% in 1990 (p.180).

The current superintendent gender gap.

While more women have entered the superintendency since 1990, there is still a significant disparity between the number of women and men in the role, especially when compared to the educational workforce. Using a variety of sources outlining superintendent statistics by gender, Table 1 Percentage of Female Superintendents, 1910-2018 presents superintendent data by gender for the last 110 years.

Table 1

Percentage of Female Superintendents, 1910-2018

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.94</td>
<td>10.98</td>
<td>9.07</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>14.45</td>
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As Table 1 indicates, the percentage of female superintendents over the last nearly 110 years has varied widely, with a low of 3.38% in the year 1970 and a current all-time high of 22.5% in the year 2018. While the current percentage of female superintendents is the highest it has been,
there remains a significant gap between the percentage of women in the teaching force and the
women in superintendencies. In his article “Where are all the women superintendents?”, Glass
(2000) notes that in the year 2000, just 1,984 of the nation’s 13,728 superintendents or 14.45%
were women while 72% of the teaching force is female (“Where are all the women
superintendents” para.1). Superville (2016) writes that in the year 2016, while women made up
76% of the teaching force, 52% of the principalship, and 78% of central office administrators,
women account for less than a quarter of all superintendents. The most recent Salary and
Benefits Study of Superintendents by the AASA released in January, 2018 reported that 22.5%
of superintendent respondents identify as female (Finnan & McCord, 2018, p.10). These
statistics represent a gender gap of approximately 50% between the teaching force and the
superintendency and almost 60% between central offices administrators and the superintendency.
While women have made progress since 1990 in ascending to the role of superintendent, there
continues to remain a significant underrepresentation of women in the leading role of education.
Skrla (2003) states that research on superintendent statistics show that men are “twenty times
more likely” than women to enter the superintendency (p.248). In NC where this study was
conducted, there is a similar gender gap in the superintendency. Currently, there are 115 school
superintendents in NC, with four of these superintendents serving as interims during
superintendent searches. Of the remaining 111 superintendents, only 26 or 23.4% are women
(2017-18 Directory of superintendents, 2018). This represents a disparity of approximately 56%
between the NC teaching force and its superintendents. In addition to the gender gap, it is
important to note that women in the superintendency are concentrated in smaller districts, with
women representing only “9 percent” of superintendents in “urban areas” (Pascopella, 2008,
Female leadership section, para.1). As was established in the 1800s, the city superintendantency
has more visibility and is noted as “a more prestigious role” (Blount, 1998, p.45). While women are advancing into the superintendency, they are still vastly underrepresented and are securing smaller, less visible positions.

**Part III: Causes of Gender Inequity in the Superintendency**

The historical data on females in the superintendency has served as the impetus for multiple studies on causes for gender inequality. A review of this research shows there are multiple theories on why there is a low percentage of women in the superintendency. For the purpose of this study, the researcher examines here a model presented by Sharp, Malone, Walter, and Supley (2004) to identify three themes within the research including psychological factors, limited opportunities, and societal expectations. To effect change in the gender gap, each of the perspectives must be understood if they are to be remedied.

**Psychological factors.**

The first model presented by Sharp et al. (2004) is a psychological perspective. While many theories exist within this perspective, the overall concept assumes that the individual, not society or institutions, is responsible for her or his movement into positions of power. It proposes the most competent workers are promoted in the workforce and, accordingly, those who are not promoted, such as women into the superintendency, are overlooked due to a “defect” (Dowell & Lawrin, 2013, p.54). Within the framework of this model, the researcher examines how gender bias and its effect on perception keep women from attaining the school superintendency.

One of the psychological factors indicated in the research that keeps women from the superintendency is the perception of women as weak managers. As previously discussed, educational administration was professionalized during the early 20th century on the notion of scientific management. Because of this, administrative positions in the school system have been
established as management positions with an emphasis on fiscal responsibility, organization, and efficiency. In his study on female underrepresentation in the superintendency, Glass (2000) identified seven barriers for women entering the position. One of the barriers he found is “[s]chool boards are not willing to hire women superintendents” (Glass ceiling section, para.1-4). Brunner & Kim (2010) explain boards’ unwillingness to hire women as superintendents is a direct result of their perception of female leaders. The authors write a significant barrier to women attaining the superintendency is “school board members’ perception that women are not strong managers…[and] that women are unqualified to handle budgeting and finances” (p.300-301). As the authors note, there is “very little evidence” women actually are weak managers or that they are unprepared to handle budgets; rather, it is board members’ “negative perceptions of women’s lack of preparedness” that continue to keep boards from hiring female superintendents (p.301). In his study on board member perceptions of superintendents, Glass (2000) found boards place “a high degree of emphasis on budget and fiscal decisions” by using candidates’ “experience” as the measure of their potential for the superintendency (Lack of credentials section, para. 3). He likewise found that while half of women in his study had central office experience, very few had responsibilities in personnel or finance (Glass, 2000, Lack of credentials section, para. 4). Because board members continue to view the superintendent role as needing a strong manager of people and money and women are stereotyped as inexperienced and weak, women are categorized as unprepared for the superintendency.

Another theory within this framework is the “double bind” theory. It argues management positions are built in a predominately male culture and environment. Accordingly, the expected management model is governed by masculine styles and characteristics. For a person to be successful in such a position, she or he must adapt to a male culture and managerial style. A
woman, then, must be both masculine and feminine to appropriately fit into the position. Ragins, Townsend & Mattis (1998) explain the conflict of this duality:

This male model places women in a double bind: if their managerial types are feminine, they run the risk of not being viewed as effective managers, but if they adopt masculine styles viewed as appropriate for managerial roles, they may be criticized for not being feminine. Dominant behaviors that people associate with leadership are frequently deemed less attractive in women. (p.30)

The double bind theory is evidenced in women’s experiences in the teaching profession even from its inception. As women entered the role of teacher in the 19th century, Blount (1998) argues women had to “satisfy both sides of [a] paradox simultaneously” (p.17). Women taught norms and values perpetuating societal male dominance while their presence in the workforce represented what Sally Schwager (1988) noted as their own representation of “nontraditional values…. [and] even radical change” (p.157). As women ascended into education and the superintendency, this double bind has become a mode of securing and surviving in top leadership positions. Because top management positions are considered to be male in sex-type, these positions are perceived to require a male skill-set. Executive level jobs are thought to require an “achievement-oriented aggressiveness and an emotional toughness” (Dowell & Larwin, 2013, p.60). Heilman (2001) explains these skills are perceived as distinctly male and counter to the stereotype of both how women are and how they are expected to behave (p.659). The complexity presented in the double bind theory is a psychological factor discouraging women from the superintendency. Unlike men, women not only have to be top performers, they also have to “develop a professional style” acceptable to their male counterparts (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998, p.30). As Ragins et al (1998) write, women in managerial positions are “forced” to be neither masculine nor feminine, but rather to take on the “daunting challenge” of being acceptable to men and not threaten their hegemony (p.30-31).
Another psychological factor keeping women from attaining the superintendency is the gender bias placed on women’s abilities to be successful in the role. As Diekman & Eagly (2000) write, women are perceived to be expressive, communal, nurturing, and supportive while men are perceived as less emotional and more competent (p.1187). These female qualities are viewed as incompatible with leadership roles; research suggests women’s careers suffer because of the caregiving stereotype (Hooble, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009, p.941). Heilman (2001) described this theory as the “lack of fit” model (p.660). In this theory, job candidates are evaluated and hired based on their perceived fit in the position: if the hiring manager perceives the individual holds the attributes for the job’s requirements, she or he is likely to be perceived as a good fit for the position and is expected to be successful in the role. Conversely, if the candidate is perceived as not having the attributes for the position, she or he is perceived as a poor fit and failure is expected (p.660). Because educational administration was built on the method of scientific management, it has historically been perceived as male sex-typed. According to Heilman’s (2001) “lack of fit” theory, the perceived lack of fit between the requirements of a traditionally male job and the stereotypic attributes ascribed to women results in hiring managers, such as school boards, perceiving that a woman is a poor fit for the superintendency. Because a woman is perceived as being a poor fit, it is expected women will fail at the job. As Heilman (2001) explains, “these expectations of failure give rise to a clear bias toward viewing women as ill equipped to perform the job competently” (p.660). Even when women are qualified candidates for the position, the perception of the skill set required in the superintendency creates psychological barriers to women entering the role.

Another concept included in the psychological factors keeping women from the superintendency includes the concept of meritocracy. Meritocracy is founded on the idea that the
most competent or qualified candidates will be promoted. It assumes, then, the candidate’s identity does not impact advancement. If this concept were true, it would justify the current large representation of men in the superintendency by suggesting men are simply most qualified for the position. Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) explain meritocracy is “deeply institutionalized,” and used to legitimize unequal outcomes while minimizing issues of structural or historical inequities (p.376). The authors explain women themselves accept meritocracy as an explanation for their own denial into leadership positions, even when they have experienced instances of gender discrimination (p.376). Because meritocracy is deeply accepted in American culture, women develop strategies to accept their belief in a “just world” in which they justify discrimination (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010, p.376). These strategies include women denying their experiences with sexism as normal behavior, applying stereotypes about women to differentiate between high- and low-achieving women, and denying discrimination against women by justifying their own competence and integration into the male workforce (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010, p.376). As noted previously, the unequal distribution of female to male superintendents in a field dominated by women is evidence of disparate impact and discrimination. The acceptance of this discrimination as meritocracy is a psychological barrier preventing women’s advancement into the superintendency.

**Limited opportunities.**

The second perspective offered by Sharp et al. (2004) explains women are underrepresented in the superintendency due to limited opportunities. Estler (1975) refers to this perspective as the discrimination model (p.368). In this perspective, there are structural and systematic barriers keeping females from advancing into the superintendency even when the educational workforce is overwhelmingly female. She explains discrimination occurs when
institutional patterns result from intentionally excluding particular people from advancing (Estler, 1975, p.369). Accordingly, men benefit from institutional structures for advancement and are favored in promotional practices. Conversely, women cannot advance to positions of power even if they are qualified and seek the positions. Career pathways, compensation, mentoring, education, and the age at which women enter administration are all factors that limit women’s opportunities for advancement.

One way women are not advancing into the superintendency is due to career paths into the role. Superintendents are generally hired from within the profession, with the majority having served as principals. While the teaching force is majority female, the percentage of female administrators remains low in comparison to the number of women in the classroom (Dowell & Lawrin, 2013, p.55). Additionally, most superintendents come to the position having served as high school principals, where there are fewer women. As Dowell & Lawrin (2013) explain, during the time of their study, approximately 75% of elementary classroom teachers were women but 75% of the current superintendents did not teach at the elementary level (p.55). Additionally, they explain that “few women are hired for high school principal positions and it is the number one position from which one ascends to the superintendency” (p.56). While the number of women in the high school principalship has increased over the past few decades, the percentage is still low. The authors state that in 1973, women held less than one percent of high school principal positions and by 1990 just nine to 16% were female (p.56). In their examination of various pathways for women and men superintendents, Brunner & Kim (2010) found disparities between access to the superintendency based on gender. They found while most male superintendents moved to their positions directly from the high school principalship, the majority of women superintendents moved to their positions from an assistant superintendent position.
Additionally, none of their respondents moved from elementary principal directly to superintendency (p.290). These data indicate men have more access than women to key positions with high visibility that lead directly to the superintendency (p.290). Additionally, women’s career pathways to the superintendency are more complex and time-consuming, as women have to advance through more layers of the organization to advance to the superintendency (p.290-291).

This trend is mirrored in the data on NC principals. To examine the gender inequality of the superintendency career path in NC, the researcher collated data from the NC Department of Public Instruction on current principal sex by level for the year 2018. For this study, the researcher only examined principal gender in traditional schools in the 115 NC local education agencies (LEAs). The collated data is represented in Table 2: Percentage of NC Principals by Gender and Level (2018).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Female (n=1468)</th>
<th>Male (n=981)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary(^a)</td>
<td>71.60</td>
<td>28.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle(^b)</td>
<td>51.16</td>
<td>48.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High(^c)</td>
<td>37.60</td>
<td>61.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-level(^d)</td>
<td>59.48</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59.94</td>
<td>40.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^a\)Schools identified as having only students in grades K-5

\(^b\)Schools identified as having only students in grades 6-8

\(^c\)Schools identified as having only students in grades 9-12

\(^d\)Schools identified as having students in any other combination of grades
The data show of the 2,449 principals in traditional public schools in NC, most of them, at 59.94%, are women. To examine how women fit into the career pathway to the superintendency, the researcher broke the data into principal gender by the following school levels: elementary, middle, high, and multi-level. Examining the data by school type shows a disparity in level placement: women represent the majority of principals at both the elementary and middle school levels; however, men represent the majority of high school principals, at 61.8%. At the high school level in NC, women represent just 37.6% of principals, representing a gap of 34% between women’s highest representation in the elementary level and their lowest representation at the high school level. As the research shows, while women make up the majority of principals at the elementary school level, the middle school level, and overall, the primary pathway to the superintendency—the high school principalship—is held by more men than women.

Compensation is another limited opportunity women face in seeking the superintendency. While there is “no doubt” women are earning higher pay than they did in the past, there continues to be a compensation gap between women and men employees, with men continuing to earn more (Waldfogel, 1998, p. 138). One argument made to justify the gender pay gap regards human capital, including productivity and work experience differences between the sexes due to the historical division of labor in the market (Dowell & Larwin, 2013, p. 57). However, in their research on the gender pay gap, Blau and Kahn (2007) found when they controlled for education and experience, the pay gap between women and men could not be explained by the human capital theory (p. 7). Additionally, Waldfogel (1998) explains women with children are even more susceptible to the gender pay gap, with these women experiencing a “10-15 percent” pay penalty compared to women without children, even when these women had the same level of education (p.143). In contract, there is “no such family penalty for men” (Waldfogel, 1998,
In fact, married men earn more than other men, earning a “premium…from 10-15 percent” (Waldfogel, 1998, p.143). A startling concern about women’s pay was discovered in a study conducted by Callahan-Levy and Messe (1979). They found in their study on women’s perceptions of their self-worth that females as young as first grade through college tended to pay themselves less than males of the same age did. This led the authors to conclude women are “socialized to have a weaker sense” of their own worth (p.444). They hypothesize this correlates to women’s perceptions that pay is not evaluative of their work because they have not expected pay for their traditional work of being mothers and housekeepers (Callahan-Levy and Messe 1979, p.434). Additionally, England (1982) found women were paid less than their counterparts when the field was predominately female, such as education (p.360). The gender pay gap represents another limited opportunity to the superintendency for women, as it illustrates an example of inequity in the profession.

Another limiting opportunity hindering women’s advancement is women’s access to mentors. Due to the political nature of the superintendency, access to the role may require more than credentials and experience. Because the superintendency has been historically “dominated” by male “professional networks,” female candidates likely need advocates to help them in preparing for and in securing the position (Sperandio, 2015, p.419). Glass (2000) writes women have “less-developed mentoring” systems than men do (Glass ceiling section, para.4). He notes these mentor systems are important because mentors often act as “go-betweens” for superintendent candidates and school boards (Glass ceiling section, para.4). Brunner & Kim (2010) negate Glass’s findings and argue women do have mentors. They explain their study shows “more women administrators have the experience of mentorships than men…[and] about 77 percent of women…had men mentors” (p.292-293). While their data suggest more women
have mentors, they acknowledge women’s experiences with mentors may be defined differently than Glass’s and these mentorships may be different in quality than men’s experiences (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p.293). While the majority of women may identify having a mentor, it is noted the quality of women’s experiences with mentors may not prepare or give them the same access to the superintendency. Sperandio (2015) writes women’s identified mentors are often not part of the “old boys’ networks” that give them access to the “unspoken recruitment and hiring practices” to which men have access (p.420). Additionally, if the majority of women who have mentors identify their mentors as men and not women, there may be a gap in the male mentor’s understanding of how women can effectively advance into the superintendency due to the barriers women face. Because the superintendency has been built on male-stereotyped norms, male mentors may not be able to acknowledge these barriers and prepare female candidates for success in achieving or maintaining the role. While mentorships are critical for women’s advancement into the superintendency, women have limited opportunities in securing mentors that may help them advance to these positions.

Another limited opportunity women face in seeking the superintendency concerns education and credentials. While women represent the majority of candidates in educational leadership programs, there continue to be educational and certification barriers for women’s advancement into the superintendency that men do not face. Bjork (2000) notes in the past decade “the number of women eclipsed that of men in professional preparation programs” (p.9). Additionally, Glass (2000) writes women are achieving doctoral degrees “at comparable rates” to men (Lack of credentials section, para.1). Even while women represent “more than 50 percent” of candidates in administrative preparation programs, Glass (2000) notes only “10 percent” of women are electing to earn the superintendency credential or licensure with their degree (Lack of
credentials section, para.1). Additionally, while women are earning doctoral degrees at comparable rates to men, research shows women need more education to secure the superintendency. Carnevale, Smith and Gulish (2018) found women need “one more degree” than men to have the same earnings in “every industry” (p.6). This is reflected in the profile of superintendents in the state of NC where the researcher is conducting her study. In NC, all but four, or a total of 85%, of the current female superintends hold doctoral degrees. Of all men superintendents in NC, 75% hold doctoral degrees, representing a gap of 10% between female and male superintendents (2017-18 Directory of superintendents, 2018). If women need an additional degree to move into the superintendency, they are less likely to advance into the position due to added obstacles of access and cost.

Lastly, the age at which women enter the pathway to the superintendency is an additional limiting opportunity women face. Due to various factors, women enter educational administration “at an older age” than men (Glass, 2000, Women enter too late section, para.1). Pascopella (2008) explains one reason for women entering administration at an older age is due to the unspoken requirement that women must have more career experience than men. He found while the majority of men entered the superintendency directly from the principalship, women are 40% more likely to enter the superintendency from an assistant superintendent position (Pascopella, 2008, Female leadership section, para.2). Also, Glass (2000) notes women spend more time than men as classroom teachers (Personal preferences section, para. 3). If women enter administration at an older age with more classroom experience and then must hold a central office position prior to the superintendency, it will take women many more years than men to reach the superintendency. Additionally, women’s lifestyles add another factor in why women enter educational administration at a later age. The conflict of women as mothers is one of these
Women have more breaks in their careers than men, often due to the responsibilities associated with raising children. Parker (2015) explains in her research mothers were “much more likely than fathers to report experiencing significant career interruptions in order to attend to their families’ needs” (para. 2). Another factor women face is the balance of work and family obligations. Women often serve as the primary homemaker and experience difficulty in managing the demands of administration with their duties as wives, partners and/or mothers. Accordingly, women often wait to enter administration at a later age once their family obligations are fulfilled. Eckman (2004) explains women identify the conflict between work and family obligations as a barrier much more than men (p.193). A myriad of barriers exist that cause women to enter educational administration at a later age, causing women to be less likely to ascend to the superintendency than their male counterparts.

**Societal expectations.**

The third perspective offered by Sharp et al. (2004) regards societal expectations. As the authors note, this perspective emphasizes society as a whole places social expectations on women. Because society and not the individual expects women to function and behave in particular ways, women are discriminated against in the workplace. Estler (1975) refers to this perspective as the woman’s place model. Within this model, the research explains how societal barriers such as defined sex roles, motherhood, and work-family conflict keep women from attaining the school superintendency (p.368).

As Estler (1975) explains, societal expectations create barriers to women’s mobility in the workplace. In her model of the woman’s place, she argues society has created and accepted a “differential socialization” for men and women (Estler, 1975, p.368). Men and women have been taught to know this distinction and perceive they are “separate and distinct” (Estler, 1975, p.368).
The workplace then reinforces these differing roles by creating men’s jobs and women’s jobs. Estler (1975) argues this socialization of men and women’s roles affect women’s aspirations of advancing to positions of power in educational leadership (p.368). Because society has adopted clearly defined sex roles, Estler (1975) states women are caught between the desire for social acceptance and intellectual achievement (p.368). Accordingly, women are caught in a “double bind” that places societal expectations and career at odds. The traditional male characteristics expected for managerial positions and the desire to fulfil societal expectations result in women having “limited aspirations” to pursue educational administration (Estler, 1975, p.368). This complexity often forces women to not aspire to managerial positions or to adopt difficult, complex lifestyle choices to accommodate home and work responsibilities.

One of the most complex societal expectations placed on women in this perspective that serves as a barrier to the superintendency is motherhood. Society continues to expect women to be mothers and serve as the primary parent for childrearing. This expectation comes in direct conflict with the superintendency. In their study of female school administrators, Derrington and Sharratt (2009) found female administrators identify their involvement with family and motherhood as keeping them from entering the superintendency (p.18). The authors noted that of all factors considered, they found parenting issues play a “particularly crucial role” in whether a woman seeks the superintendency. This is reflected in practice, as women with children in grades K-8 are “rarely superintendents” (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, p.19). Due to societal expectations for women in the home, women are more likely to have breaks in their work experiences and have less of an incentive to invest in formal education (Dowell & Larwin, 2013, p.57). If women are less likely to invest in formal education than men, they are less likely to earn the advance degrees or certifications required to be eligible for superintendent positions.
Additionally, this societal expectation of women-as-mothers and men-as-breadwinners places stress on women in the workplace. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) found working mothers are “the most vulnerable to suffering…work-family stress…[and t]hey are generally less satisfied with [both] their personal growth and with their careers” (p.4). In her study on the conflict of motherhood and the principalship, Jordan (2012) found female administrators identified job demands of performance and visibility as significant factors in both women’s stressors in maintaining work-life balance and in their conceptualizations of personal and societal expectations of motherhood (pp.70-93). While working mothers feel more stress, fatherhood, in contrast, was “a career asset” (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000, p.5). This dichotomy between stress of working mothers versus favoritism of working fathers points directly to how gendered assumptions of motherhood continue to bar women’s advancement.

In his work on work-family life and women managers, Lewis (2001) found societal expectations of women as care-givers is a foundational assumption in women’s disadvantage in career advancement (p.355). He writes in the traditional male model of work, there is an expected separation of work and home and the expectation of housework is placed on women. Accordingly, greater value is placed on male workers as they are perceived to have less commitment or responsibility to family and children (Lewis, 2001, p.358). This is particularly true in careers for which long day, evening and weekend work hours are expected, such as the roles of high school principal and superintendent. Lewis (2001) explains that in these careers, long hours spent “visibly at work” is valued because it represents “commitment and productivity” (p.358). Due to the expectations of family commitments, the norm is established that women cannot be committed to these professions. A “gendered assumption” is then established that perpetuates “androcentric expectations in the workplace” (p.358). Friedman and
Greenhaus (2000) also identify two assumptions hurting women in this societal expectation. They explain the first assumption placed on women is they all have or desire caregiving responsibilities (p.13). Of course, not all women are or aspire to be mothers, partners, or have family commitments. In fact, the authors found women who are “highly focused on their careers” are less likely to marry and less likely to have children (p.33). The authors explain the second assumption in this societal expectation is work and family are incompatible. It assumes women cannot be both managers and mothers (p.34). Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) found career-driven women frequently felt the burden of this societal expectation. They write women face “the perception of their employers that those among them who want to balance career and family are not committed to their work” (p.37). Accordingly societal expectations force women to face “tradeoffs between career and family” (p.37). The social construct of women as primary caregiver creates conditions limiting women’s advancement into the superintendency.

Much study has been conducted to understand the barriers women face in attaining the superintendency. As outlined by Sharp et al. (2004) barriers include psychological factors, limited opportunities, and societal expectations. Understanding the research allowed the researcher to analyze how the 14 study participants made meaning of the leadership experiences and how motifs amongst their stories provided information about the gendered role of the superintendency.

Part IV: The Benefits of Women in Leadership

Although the career pipeline to the superintendency is overwhelmingly female, the majority of superintendents are men. The sheer underrepresentation of women in the role points to discrimination when one considers disparate impact. One false assumption that could be made about why a gender gap exists is that men are overrepresented because they are better suited for
A review of the current candidate pipeline of educational leadership and research on leadership in the superintendent negates this assumption: women are ready and perhaps uniquely suited for the superintendent. The following section reviews research on the nature of the superintendent in the 21st century, information on the current superintendent candidate pipeline, and how women can lead in the profession. Combined, these factors show how female superintendents can establish conditions that create strong educational environments.

**The 21st century superintendent.**

To understand the benefits of women in leadership in the superintendency, it is critical to review the role’s evolution and what skills are required of today’s superintendent. In their study on the superintendency, Kowalski et al. (2010) explain that as social and political changes occur in America, likewise the mission and vision of public education change (Historical and contemporary perspectives section, para.3). As these changes in public education occur, the nature of the superintendency also evolves. Callahan (1966) found prior to 1970, there were four distinct roles of the superintendent, including teacher-scholar, business manager, statesman, and applied social scientist (p.8). In their study of the contemporary role of the superintendency, Kowalski et al. (2010) explain that with America’s transition to an “information-base” era, the superintendency gained a fifth role of communicator (Evolution of the Superintendent section, para.2). It is important to note that as society has evolved, none of these five roles has been eliminated (Cuban, 1976, pp.15-25). Rather, superintendents have had to manage all five roles simultaneously, and thus the superintendency today is more “demanding and complex” (Kowalski et al., 2010, Evolution of the Superintendent section, para.1).

Once the superintendent was established in the late 19th century, the earliest conceptualization of the role was superintendent as teacher-scholar (Callahan, 1966, p.8).
first superintendents appointed by local boards were employed from classroom teacher positions (Kowalski et al., 2010, Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar, para.1). These positions were established prior to administrative educational programs, advanced degrees, or certifications. The purpose of these superintendent roles was to “supervis[e] classroom instruction and assur[e] uniformity of curriculum” (Spring, 1990, p.141). They functioned as “lead educators” who supervised principals, teachers, and students (Kowalski et al., 2010, Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar, para.1). During this time, superintendents provided written reports for school boards but generally did not have authority over fiscal or personnel decisions (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p.21). Callahan (1966) explained these early superintendents viewed and wrote of themselves as “teacher[s] of teachers” (p.192). Superintendents in large city school systems were identified as teacher-scholars, as they wrote “extensively on the history and philosophy of education, as well as how best to teach” (Cuban, 1976, p.16). Thus, the original conceptualization of superintendent as teacher-scholar required superintendents to primarily be skilled in knowledge of teaching content and pedagogy.

Between 1910 and 1929, the conceptualization of superintendent evolved to superintendent as business manager, a role that impacted the superintendency greatly “over the next three decades” (Callahan, 1966, p.8). As local school boards found themselves unable to manage the many facets of schools, they hired superintendents to manage the myriad of “logistical challenges” including budgets, personnel, and facilities (Blount, 1998, p.38). During this time, the industrial revolution brought Taylor’s concept of scientific management and standardization, efficiency, and control were valued (as cited in Shafritz, et al., 2011, p.65-68). Many school boards believed these concepts should be mirrored in schools and they began to place “more emphasis on a superintendent’s managerial skills” rather than her or his ability to
teach (Kowalski et al., 2010, Superintendent as Business Manager, para. 1). It was during this conceptualization of the superintendent as business manager that programs in educational administration pioneered (Callahan, 1966, p. 207). With these programs, the superintendency was established as an elite position of power superior to the teaching force (Kowalski et al., 2010, Superintendent as Business Manager, para. 2). During this movement, men who understood “business and industrial procedures” and could solve “financial, organizational, and mechanical problems” were hired as superintendents rather than educators who understand the social or philosophical side of education (Callahan, 1966, pp. 208-209). With this movement came an attack on female leadership in the superintendency, and women went from representing nearly 11% of superintendents in 1930 to a low of 3.38% in 1970. Blount (1998) explains this conceptualization of superintendent as business manager was one of a “variety of means to undermine women’s expanding public roles” (p. 91). The gendered assumptions created by its movement still create barriers to women’s attainment of the superintendency.

Callahan (1966) explains the Great Depression caused the superintendency to evolve into the role of superintendent as statesman (Callahan, 1966, p. 8). Because the Great Depression “threatened the very existence of the free society,” educators began to assess their educational programs and practices (Callahan, 1966, pp. 212-213). The leader of this new conceptualization was Superintendent Jesse H. Newlon, who warned “the greatest danger” of superintendents at that time was they were more concerned with “mere business routines” than the pedagogy of teachers in the classroom (Callahan, 1966, p. 211). Newlon argued instead the superintendent should engage in “educational leadership…within a democratic framework” (Callahan, 1966, p. 212). By engaging the workforce and community, the superintendent could work with others to solve educational problems by creating policy. Because superintendents as statesman were
expected to be able to involve others in their work, they had to “galvanize support” from the community which “had obvious political implications” (Kowalski et al., 2010, Superintendent as Statesman, para.2). During this conceptualization, the ability of superintendents to mobilize constituents and distribute leadership within the political realm was valued.

Callahan (1966) identified the fourth conceptualization of the school superintendency as applied social scientist, which occurred from 1954 to 1966 and in reaction to post-World War II life in America (p.8). With an “increase in school-age children and the creation of new school districts in newly established suburbs” came a desire for superintendents to solve “complex social and economic problems” (Kowalski et al., 2010, Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist, para.1). There was a new expectation for superintendents to have knowledge of how to solve educational problems in a diverse, democratic society. This was achieved through study of social sciences, and educational leadership programs included these domains in coursework. Callahan (1966) explains this superintendent was expected to “underst[and] human beings and organizations and [to use this information to] keep the organization running effectively” (p.219). Skills valued in the superintendent during this time period were the knowledge of human behavior and the ability to problem-solve social issues at the conceptual level within schools.

In their contemporary study of the superintendency, Kowalski et al. (2010) identified the fifth and current conceptualization of the superintendency as communicator (Evolution of the Superintendent section, para.2). Historically, superintendents were trained as business executives who communicated using a “classical model of organizational communication” (Kowalski et al., 2000, Superintendent as Communicator section, para.1). In this former model, superintendents generally communicated “instructions…down a chain of command” (Kowalski et al., 2001, Superintendent as Communicator section, para.1). Beginning in the late 20th century, this mode
of communication was challenged because it had negative effects on “employee commitment, job satisfaction, and overall organizational effectiveness” (Kowalski et al., 2001, Superintendent as Communicator section, para.2). Today, superintendents lead in an era of “astonishing technological changes” and extremely fast-paced environments which have affected how superintendents communicate (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p.5). Additionally, the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 presented new expectations to affect student achievement outcomes (Sherman, 2007, p.678). Sherman (2007) explains “the contemporary superintendent...must serve their districts in curriculum planning and development and in instructional management...[while being aware] of the achievement of all groups of students” (p. 678). The combination of technology and the demands of the era of school accountability has required superintendents to decentralize control. Bjork and Blasé (2009) explain “educational reform initiatives in the United States have contributed to re-centering schools to focus on learning and teaching, as well as altering the ways schools are structured, governed and led” (p.196). For superintendents to affect educational outcomes, they must establish relationships with a diverse group of stakeholders (Bjork & Blasé, 2009, p.196). Accordingly, the classical form of top-down communication has been replaced with the “relational model of communication” (Kowalski et al.,2010, Superintendent as Communicator, para.3). The 21st century superintendent requires an ability to establish and communicate a vision to affect large-scale student achievement outcomes.

It is critically important to understand how these historical conceptualizations of the superintendency affect the current role. As the superintendency has evolved in response to society, none of these conceptualizations has been eliminated and, accordingly, the role has become increasingly more complex as superintendents have had to balance each of these five
roles (Cuban, 1976, pp.15-25). In the 21st century, the superintendent is expected to be scholar, business manager, statesman, social scientist, and communicator, all while raising student academic achievement. The expectation of superintendents to represent and juggle these varying roles has created a job that requires a highly-skilled professional.

**Current superintendent candidate pipeline.**

The 21st century superintendency has become so complex, in fact, that the challenges of the role have led to short tenure and high turnover. Kowalski et al. (2010) found the average tenure of the superintendent is between five and six years. Additionally, they found nearly 50% of their surveyed superintendents stated they would no longer be superintendents within the next five years, “suggesting the probability of substantial turnover” in coming years (Career Intentions section, para.2). As Carter & Cunningham (1997) explain, unless we can stop the continuous rapid turnover in the superintendency, we cannot expect to engage in “ongoing continuous improvement” in education (p.107). It is critical to educational systems, and most importantly to students, that the looming superintendency shortage be addressed.

In considering how the complexities of the 21st century superintendency has resulted in short tenures and high turnover in the superintendency, it is vital to school systems’ health that local boards of education look to the candidate pools in their districts to fill these positions, with most of these candidates being women. As has been reviewed, women hold the credentials and experience in educational leadership needed to move into the superintendency and address the upcoming superintendency vacancies. When considering the sheer number of superintendent candidates that will be needed to fill vacancies in the next five years, it is critical local boards of education seek candidates within their districts who understand the complexities of school
system operations. Because women represent the majority of these candidates, it is appropriate and logical to consider how women can provide leadership for fulfilling these needs.

**Transformational Leadership.**

Not only are there a large number of women in the field to fill vacant superintendent positions, research on transformational leadership suggests women may possess the skills needed for the new demands of the position. As women entered the teaching profession in the first half of the 19th century, some advocates argued women’s skills for educating were well suited for education. As Woody (1929) notes in his work *A History of Women’s Education in the United States*, The New York Committee on Hiring Women Teachers encouraged women were “gentle, tender, enduring, unaspiring” (p.463). Harriett Beecher Stowe espoused it would be women, not men, who were capable of molding our future citizens. She stated, “…if men have more knowledge they have less talent at communicating it, not have they the patience, the long-suffering, and gentleness necessary to superintend the formation of character” (Blount, 1998, p.19). Female characteristics were cited as positive reasons in advocating for women’s movement into the education profession. As arguments for women’s superiority as classroom teachers were made in the advent of their assentation into the position, so too has the argument been made for the benefits of women in leadership in the superintendancy. In her comments on advancing into the superintendancy of Chicago schools, Ella Flagg Young noted the superintendancy was “women’s natural field…[and] a woman is better qualified for this work than a man” (“The highest salaried,” 1909, p.515).

While male superintendent candidates may certainly possess strong leadership characteristics making them highly qualified for the role of the 21st century superintendancy, it is critical the research on women’s unique abilities are highlighted. Because women have been
largely excluded from the superintendency, an understanding of the leadership abilities associated in the literature with women provides insight how women are not only available in number to serve superintendency roles but that some women possess the skills required for entering and maintaining the superintendency. Literature on leadership suggests an effective leadership style in contemporary organizations is transformational leadership, which can be associated with feminine gender roles (Lopez-Zafra, Garcia-Retamero & Martos, 2012, p.99). In this form of leadership, the superintendent establishes herself as a “role model” who works to “gain the trust and confidence” of her followers (Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012, p.99). These leaders motivate their followers to improve performance by using their own emotions and their staff’s emotions (Bass, 1998, p.62). Transformational leaders are “supportive” and “considerate” of their workforce (Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012, p.99). Bjork (2000) notes successful women leaders over the past 30 years have leadership characteristics “consistent with the call for school reform” because of their transformational leadership (p.10). Throughout all levels of the organization, she notes women are “relational, community-minded, and open to empowering decision making” (Bjork, 2000, p.10). Grogan (1996) writes women leaders tend to be caring, collaborative, and reflective and have an interest in affecting change within the organization (p.171). Women leaders tend to use “democratic leadership styles and power,” leading to high levels of job satisfaction from staff (Bjork, 2000, p.10). Additionally, these female characteristics of transformational leadership also lead to enhanced “employee performance” (Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012, p.100). Paradoxically, the very qualities that historically have been reasons for keeping women from the superintendency—democratic decision-making, emotional intelligence, valuing community collaboration, and a caring, reflective way of leading—are the qualities needed in the 21st century superintendency. In addition to some women’s abilities to lead through their
transformational leadership, Tallerio & Blount (2004) note feminist scholars have written of the benefits of gender integration in the workforce. These benefits include: student learning from female role models in leadership; integration of positive female stereotypes in the superintendency; integration of an ethic of care; and the dismantling of gender inequity (Tallerio & Blount, 2004, p.648). While men are certainly not excluded from possessing and being transformational leaders, an understanding of how women’s abilities are associated with transformational leadership highlights the necessity to better integrate women into these educational leadership roles. As the demands of the school superintendency become more complex, the superintendency vacancies become more prevalent, and the benefits of women in leadership are evident, it is clear women must be considered in order to ensure our school systems and our students have the highest-quality educational environments.

**Feminist Theoretical Framework**

In conducting this study, the researcher used a feminist framework for understanding how the 14 female participants made meaning of their experiences in the gendered role of superintendent. Tisdell (2008) explains the “purpose” of feminist research is to examine “whose interests will be served by the research,” and the “hope” of feminist research is that such study will “contribute to an understanding of gender relations and the processes that contribute to knowledge construction through the research process” (p.334). Using a feminist theoretical framework, the researcher sought to conduct research that advantages women in all phases of the study, from conducting the research to the study’s analysis.

Feminist research has played an important role in understanding women’s experiences in educational administration. Skrla and Young (2003) explain research on women in educational leadership was “virtually nonexistent[t] prior to the early 1960s” (p.1). In the 1980s and 1990s,
the introduction of “feminist epistemology and advocacy” in educational leadership research helped to shape changes in the field by addressing the myriad of issues women faced (Skrla & Young, 2003, p.1). The authors explain that after “an intense period of rising interest” in gender studies in educational leadership, however, there has been a “backlash and retrenchment of dominant androcentric discourses” in the early 21st century (Skrla & Young, 2003, p.2). As history recounted in this chapter illustrates, when the dynamics of power are challenged, the hegemonic center will adapt to retain its influence. As such, it is important feminist research continue to question, challenge, and fight the continued discrimination women face in educational leadership.

This suppression of women in educational leadership is evident in research on the superintendency gender gap. Skrla (2003) explains while there has been “significant” research on women administrators, this research has “remained marginalized by the mainstream discourses of educational administration research and has little noticeable effect on educational administration practices” (p.251). Because research on women in educational research has had little effect on changing the superintendency gender gap, Skrla (2003) proposes a new feminist approach for research that examines the “underlying normalizations” is needed (p.252). She explains normalization occurs when individuals within a culture “adopt and adapt” to existing norms about what is “possible and not possible for them to think, say, act and be” which simultaneously shapes expectations for the positions of power (Skrla, 2003, p.252). Skrla (2003) argues the normalization of femininity and masculinity in both practice and research continues to be particularly powerful in perpetuating the superintendent gender gap (p.252). She outlines how issues of silence, ambition, leadership style, and power have been normalized into feminine or masculine roles. Silence has manifested in recent research in women interviewees “inability,
unwillingness, reluctance, or refusal…to discuss gender’s role in the work lives,” as she describes that being “appropriately female is to be silent” (Skrla, 2003, p.254). Skrla (2003) describes the normalization of feminine ambition in recent research as claims that women are not interested in the superintendency or advancement into the role as unplanned and “accidental” (pp.255-257). The normalization of feminine versus masculine leadership styles explains how research and practice has accepted “the very gender stratification many of us wish to dismantle” (Skrla, 2003, p.258). Also, Skrla (2003) explains how power has been normalized as masculine or feminine in research and practice. She argues research indicates women leaders cannot be “simultaneously feminine and in charge”; accordingly, these women “redefine power…to reconcile this double bind…[by] internalizing the powerful expectations of femininity” (Skrla, 2003, p.259). Accordingly, for women to attain and retain power in a gendered role, they are forced to adopt strategies to behave as men. Butler (1988) describes how humans manipulate their identities, performing in approved gender roles for survival:

When Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is an historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or significant of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman’.….and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term ‘strategy’ better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. (p.522)

The complicated relationship between power and gender, as described by Butler, suggests that women in power conform to the male stereotypes to survive the public expectations of their gender roles. Such an implication greatly impacts women superintendents who are highly visible and susceptible to public scrutiny of their actions.
Understanding how normalizations of gender roles and how women must adapt their identities for survival are critical in this study’s approach in examining how women make meaning of their leadership experiences. In attempts to eliminate the gender gap, research and practice has focused on highlighting the barriers women face and to value women and their qualities as meaningful assets in positions of power. By normalizing and expecting certain performative behaviors for gender roles, the superintendency is likewise normalized as a man’s job. To make meaning of the perpetuated gender gap, then, we have focused on how men and women differ in educational leadership rather than focusing on the conceptualization of the role itself. We have, in short, tried to change women rather than changing the normalization of the superintendency as a man’s job. As explored in Aker’s (1990) research, organizational structure is not gender neutral and, instead, assumptions about gender underlie the construction of organizational processes (p.141-142). Due to this gendering in the organizational structure, women are disadvantaged. Aker (1990) writes, “To say that an organization…is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p.146). She suggests to affect change in gendered organizations, theorists must consider how to “restore the absent female body” (p.154).

To uncover the experiences of women in the gendered role of superintendent then, the researcher adopted a feminist theoretical framework to examine the normalization of femininity and masculinity in the superintendency. After conducting interviews with the superintendents, the researcher examined the female superintendent stories using a feminist theoretical framework and narrative analysis process examining how women make meaning of their leadership and how motifs identified across the 14 women’s leadership stories can provide information about the
gendering of the superintendency. Accordingly, practitioners can work to reject gender roles in educational leadership and redefine the superintendency as job appropriate for either a woman or a man.

Closing

Gender inequality in the NC school superintendency is an injustice that must be solved. This chapter reviewed the myriad of historical, social, and political contexts that aid in understanding the current gender gap in the superintendency. These contexts provided the researcher with foundational knowledge as she approached this study using a feminist theoretical framework and narrative analysis, which allows for effecting change in the educational leadership field.
CHAPTER III: STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The researcher proposed to answer the following research question in this study: *What do women superintendent stories tell us about the gender gap in the NC superintendency?* To answer this question, the researcher engaged in 14 elite interviews with current NC female superintendents. The purpose of these interviews was three-fold. First, this study serves to give voice to women. Capturing and telling the stories of female superintendents and their experiences in a gendered field “challenge[s] women’s oppression” by providing opportunities to make meaning of their experiences (Tisdell, 2008, p.331). Second, this study serves to identify how women make meaning of their experiences as women in a male-dominated arena. Using a narrative analysis approach, the researcher analyzed each woman’s story to identify the ways in which she makes meaning of her leadership. Third, this study serves to identify the ways in which women experience barriers in advancing to the superintendency. If women make up the vast majority of the talent pipeline to the superintendency yet they remain underrepresented, it is critical to identify what barriers cause the gender gap. While the problem is defined through superintendent data, the qualitative data provided by women superintendents helps describe the problem. By analyzing all 14 NC women superintendent stories and identifying the motifs across these stories, the researcher identified the way in which the role of superintendent remains gendered such that women are excluded from the superintendency.
Qualitative Methodology and Narrative Analysis

While the gender gap in the NC superintendency is made apparent by a review of numbers, quantitative methodology is inept to capture the day-to-day, systemic inequalities in the field because such a method “impos[es] a limited worldview on the subjects” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.101). Rather, due to the complexity of women’s relationship with the superintendency, qualitative methodology was best for understanding the barriers women experience in advancing to the position. A naturalist approach allowed the researcher to capture the intricacies of women’s experiences. Specifically, the researcher employed a narrative analysis methodology for understanding how women make meaning of their experiences. By using this qualitative approach, three ends were achieved: first, it gave women voice by valuing their stories; second, it allowed for analysis of how women make meaning of their leadership, and third, it led to actionable information to make educational leadership more socially just.

First, qualitative methods in this study place value on women’s voice by understanding their lived realities. In this study, the researcher engaged in elite interviewing with current NC female superintendents and analyzed their stories using a narrative analysis approach. The list of questions the researcher used are found in Appendix A. While some of the questions gathered demographic data about the superintendents, most questions sought to draw out women’s stories about gender discrimination in their advancement. One value of the women’s stories is they explained how these women understand themselves in relation to the phenomena of the study. Bell (2002) explains that participants in narrative inquiry “construct stories that support their interpretations of themselves…[and] provide a window into people’s beliefs and experiences” (p.209). This “window” shows how women make meaning of their experiences with gender discrimination. Marshall (2003) highlights how a qualitative approach allows women in
leadership to acknowledge their very real, day-to-day struggles. She writes this approach “exposes the very real issues of educators who have tremendous anxiety over integrating their personal- and private-sphere emotions, demands, and values with the public demands on school leaders” (p.215). Riessman (2002) argues valuing women’s stories in research methodology not only allows participants to make meaning of their experiences but also restores the power they have lost as victims of discrimination. She writes, “[F]eminist investigators…advocate less dominating and more relational modes of interviewing that…give[s] up communicative power and follow[s] participants” (p.365). The methodological approach in this study sought to “re-allocate[e] power” by allowing the female superintendents to “shap[e] and guid[e]” the research through their stories (Ross, 2017, para.5). When the research “about experiences of oppression” is guided by “people who have experienced that oppression,” it provides “participants with opportunities for reflection and for participating in the knowledge construction process” (Ross, 2017, para.5). Accordingly, because the qualitative approach employed placed value on women’s voice, it empowered women and allowed them to make meaning of their lived realities.

Second, a qualitative approach employing narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to describe how each of the 14 NC female superintendents makes meaning of her leadership. The participants in this story were asked a variety of questions that encouraged them to tell stories about their experiences in educational leadership. Narrative analysis focused on the lived experiences illustrated by participants, allowing the researcher to connect her experiences and identify themes, motifs, and concepts evident throughout her varied illustrations and anecdotes (Riessman, 2002, p.369). Through this analysis, the researcher focused on why and how the participants narrated their experiences and what this revealed about the meaning-making process. As Riessman (2002) writes, “Narrative analysts assume that tellers and listeners/questioners
interact in particular cultural milieus…essential to interpretation. Narrative analysis opens up forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We can ask the following questions: Why was the story told *that* way? How did the local context and research relationship shape *this* account?” (p.368). Through analysis of each women’s individual experience, each woman’s story is valued as holding meaning not only about how she makes meaning of her experience but also what her meaning-making suggests about the gendered role of the superintendency. Chase (1995) explains how the narrative process values how women tell their stories, treating the narration as “a form of social action” highlighting how “professional women shape their self-understandings and how they make sense of their contradictory experiences of power and subjection” (Chase, 1995, p.5). It is through these individual narrative analyses that rich data illustrate how women make meaning of their experiences and their leadership in a male-dominated arena.

Third, a qualitative approach produced information that will help make educational leadership more socially just for women. Qualitative methodology is best for informing real action. Lincoln (1993) explains that the aim of knowledge produced by research is the “transformation of social life towards its improvement” (p.43). Women’s stories about experiences with gender discrimination in their advancement to the superintendency are critical in understanding how the phenomena manifests. Bell (2002) explains that narrative inquiry “go[es] beyond …simply telling stories” and instead provides “an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (p.208). In using women’s stories, “deeply hidden assumptions” were exposed (Bell, 2002, p. 209). Women’s experiences can be valued as critical data to analyze, as their “voices serve to critique the canon of existing social structure” (LeCompte, 1993, p.10). Through this analysis, the understanding of gender
discrimination in the NC superintendency is exposed and understood, and the participants helped provide the information needed to eliminate the barriers women face in attaining the superintendency. Lincoln (1993) explains how women’s participation in this study provides information for action: “Therefore, those who are silenced must agree to tell those stories, and in agreeing, consummate a social contract to help reinvent the world in a less androcentric or unjust form and shape” (p.42). It is the participants’ lived realities that provided true insight for understanding the barriers women face in advancement to the superintendency; in absence of these stories, action cannot be taken to make educational leadership more inclusive. Truly understanding and impacting the gender gap in the superintendency requires a feminist reframing placing women’s experiences at the center of consideration.

**Site Selection and Sampling**

Due to the nature of qualitative methodology, it was impossible to include all NC female superintendents in this study. Morgan (2008) explains that in qualitative methodology, the researcher does not place emphasis on inclusion of a large sample size; rather, the qualitative researcher values the depth of research conducted with the sample chosen. He writes, “[T]he goals of [qualitative] research emphasize an in-depth and highly contextualized understanding of specific phenomena, and such goals are well-suited to small sample sizes” (Morgan, 2008, p.799). While a small study sample was appropriate for the methods of this study, site selection and the details of the sampling were important considerations for the study’s approach.

The research question in this study was site-specific, as the women who were interviewed are all superintendents in NC. Fourteen in-person interviews were conducted in the districts where the superintendents work. Because NC was the study’s site, it is important to consider the history of NC in relation to women’s advancement into the superintendency. The current
statistics on female superintendents in NC almost identically mirror those at the national level. This allows for the researcher to generalize findings about barriers to the superintendency to other states. While the superintendent statistics in NC mirror the national average, it is important to consider how NC’s history as a paternalistic state influences women’s experiences in attaining the superintendency. Paternalism in NC was the “philosophical and fiscal underpinning of many North Carolina cotton mill villages” in the 19th and early 20th centuries which employers controlled “all aspects of an employee’s life” including housing, food, medical care, clothing, and even employee discipline (Purcell, 2006, para. 2). Also, it is important to consider that NC did not grant women any form of suffrage prior to the ratification of the 19th Amendment of the US Constitution in 1920. These historical factors in NC inevitably shape the way marginalized groups such as women experience employee rights in the workplace in the state. Additionally, the researcher’s review of existing literature shows an absence of research focused on women’s experiences in the superintendency in the state of NC. Accordingly, using NC as the site for this study served to add to the existing research of women’s experience in barriers to the superintendency.

Another factor to consider is the sample of superintendents interviewed in this study. Morgan (2008) explains sample in qualitative methodology should focus not the size but rather on how the sample “serve[s] the purpose of the specific study” (p. 799). Choosing a variety of female superintendents to interview based on their backgrounds was important to collecting rich data. Likewise, choosing a wide range of female superintendents allowed the researcher to argue that the similarities in their experiences with gender inequality provides evidence of oppression within the system. Marshall & Rossman (2016) provide detail about the importance of the selection sample: “Poor sampling design decisions may threaten...findings. To justify a sample,
one should know the universe of the possible population and its variability, and then sample according to all the relevant variables” (p.109). While the researcher sought an interview with all 26 current female superintendents by asking for their participation, 14 women or approximately 54% of all female superintendents in NC participated. This sample size allowed for “intense investigation” that emphasized “theory building [and] subjective understanding” (Morgan, 2008, p.799). Of these 14 female superintendents who participated, the researcher was intentional in collecting their demographic data to ensure the sample size was inclusive. This demographic information included each participant’s name, age, marital status, children, education, and years of experience. To ensure confidentiality, identifiable demographic information is not shared in the study; however, examination of this information in the data set was important to consider how findings can be generalized, and the average information of the demographic data can be found in Appendix D. Accordingly, these 14 women’s experiences can be interpreted for analysis of gender inequality in the entire educational field.

**Entry and Access**

Securing data from elite interviews with current female superintendents was foundational to this study. The researcher first sought entry using a written letter and Institutional Review Board (IRB) Adult Consent Form. Appendices B and C of this proposal include the written letter sent to participants and the IRB approval form. Both the written letter and IRB Adult Consent Form explained all considerations of the study including: the purpose of the study; why the researcher sought the superintendent’s participation; timeline for participation; benefits and risks of the study; confidentiality; and contact information for the researcher and faculty advisor. To appeal to the female superintendent’s willingness to participate, the researcher included a personal appeal, explaining that the researcher is not only a doctoral student but also a female
high school principal who aspires to the superintendency. The letter was sent to all 26 female superintendents by both email and mail and asked for the participant to respond directly to the researcher. While the researcher anticipated having to conduct follow up with the superintendents by phone or in-person to ensure enough participation, the researcher received 14 confirmed superintendent interviews within just weeks of the mailing. This quick response from more than half of the superintendent confirming their desire to participate provided evidence that the women had stories to tell about the superintendent gender gap.

Another consideration for entry and access occurred after the interview with the female superintendent was granted. Because superintendents are the most powerful players in a school district, this form of qualitative data collection is considered elite interviewing. Elite interviewing requires a specific skill-set from the interviewer and likewise presents challenges for true access. While the first challenge to elite interviewing is gaining entry, the second immediate challenge is establishing trust and rapport. Because superintendents are busy people, they needed to know the interviewer was “trustworthy” and “valuable enough to warrant [her] time” (Marshall, 1984, p.237). Because elites are used to being interviewed, they are comfortable controlling the conversation and painting a picture that is self-rewarding. This study sought instead to draw out stories that represent women’s experiences with discrimination, depicting issues most women and men likely do not want exposed. Accordingly, when interviewing elites, the interviewer took specific actions to collect meaningful data. Marshall (1984) writes that the interviewer must inform herself of the “world, personality, preferences, traditions, cycles and schedules, motivations, and concerns of the people” she is interviewing (p.236). This allows the researcher to be prepared for the unknowns of the interview. Accordingly, prior to each interview, the researcher studied the participant, reviewing all information readily available on
the internet about the superintendent’s biography and current school district. Because superintendents are political beings, they often “play politics” in order to “influence policy and resource allocation to the advantage of the agency, of themselves, and of their constituents” (Marshall, 1984, p.236). To collect authentic data, the researcher had to be strategic, “devis[ing] appropriate rules or fronts to facilitate entree and data collection strategies that are effective without violating the norms of the environment” (Marshall, 1984, p.236). In terms of this study, this manifested in the creation and order of strategic questions that facilitated conversation regarding the interviewee’s experiences with gender inequity. As outlined in Appendix A, while the researcher approached each female superintendent with a set list of questions, the researcher reordered the sequence of questions based on the breadth of responses from the superintendent. Additionally, the researcher emphasized her harmlessness to the elite’s position, taking on the role of doctoral student and aspiring female superintendent who sought to learn from the wisdom of the participant. Another consideration in elite interviewing concerns what is produced by the participant’s involvement. Marshall (1984) explains elites may vary on their views of how they are portrayed by the data: some may “want publicity and to be identified” while others may “demand the right to review the report and delete sections” (p.243). Due to this variability, it was vital the researcher clearly defined the confidentiality of the participants in this study. In the interviews with the female superintendents, the researcher disclosed to all superintendents that no names or identifying information would be used in the research at any time. By clarifying this confidentiality at the beginning of the process, trust was established more quickly, and there was no confusion of whether the interview participant will be identified.
Researcher’s Positionality, Reciprocity, and Ethics

To establish credibility, the researcher considered her positionality in the research process. Freeman, de Marrais, Preissle, Roulston, and St. Pierre (2007) write that in qualitative research, there is no neutrality: “Neither research participants nor researchers can be neutral, because...they are always positioned culturally, historically, and theoretically” (p.27). As a female practitioner in the field, the researcher approached the research design process having dealt with experiences of gender inequality and sexism. These experiences influenced the researcher’s positionality towards the study’s content. As Lillrank (2012) notes, the researcher cannot separate the knowledge she learns from herself because “knowledge is assumed to be embodied in subjective lived experiences and the management of identity in social interaction” (p.281). Accordingly, while it was impossible for the researcher to completely detach emotionally throughout this process, the researcher acknowledged and considered how personal experiences in the field of educational leadership affected data collection and analysis. Because positionality in research is inevitable, Lerum (2001) explains one way to manage the researcher’s emotions is to “admit one’s loyalties” (p.468). The researcher engaged this strategy by acknowledging her experiences with sexism in educational leadership in each phase of the process, including the research proposal, the interview introduction, and the written analysis of the study. Another strategy the researcher employed occurred during the data collection and analysis process. Lillrank (2012) suggests researchers can ensure their positionality does not negatively affect data collection or analysis by engaging in active listening during interviews. In “active listening,” researchers “suspend [their] own perspective[s] to focus on what the interviewee has to say” (Lillrank, 2012, p.282). This was achieved in the study first through construction of open-ended interview questions that allowed participants to lead the storytelling
and second through a plan that allowed participant responses to lead the interviewee’s selection and sequence of interview questions. Because the researcher is positioned as a female educational leader who aspires to a NC superintendency, admitting her loyalty to improving gender issues for women school leaders in each phase and engaging in active listening during the interview process established trust.

Another consideration of the researcher was reciprocity, of how the researcher managed herself in the setting and how this affected the participants. Crow (2008) explains “good research ethics” must examine what the researcher takes from her participants and what she can give to them (p739). Because research requires participants to give up their time to help the study, the researcher must be prepared to compensate the participants as she is “indebted” to them (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.126). There are numerous ways in which the researcher considered providing reciprocity to the participants. It was important that the researcher considered how she would do this ahead of time as to consider role boundaries and not be placed in uncomfortable situations. In the elite interviewing with female superintendents, the researcher provided reciprocity by sharing a personal anecdote about the researcher’s experience with gender inequality as a school leader in the interview and providing a thank you note after concluding the interview. After publication of the study, the researcher will also mail a copy of the study to each participant. While these tokens are not large, the goal of providing them is to express gratitude and appreciation to each superintendent’s willingness to give her time to the researcher and the study.

Of equal importance in considering reciprocity is understanding how this study will affect the researcher and participants emotionally. In qualitative inquiry, it is impossible to detach from the research process. Due to the nature of the research on experiences with gender inequality, it
was likely that the researcher and some participants would become emotionally engaged. Lillrank (2012) explains that managing emotions in a qualitative approach is critical to knowledge production. She writes, “[A]n interviewer benefits from developing strategies to support and empower interviewees—and not challenge them—to ensure a reciprocal interaction resulting in rich data gathering” (p.282). This emotional engagement is beneficial to the research process, to the participants, and to the researcher. For the research, emotional engagement provides “valuable data” about the “social conditions” women are experiencing in the field of educational leadership (Copp, 2008, p.251). Also, for the participants, emotional engagement in this process allowed women a cathartic experience, as they had an opportunity to discuss issues and concerns that are generally banned from regular discourse. Crow (2008) explains that this opportunity to “be listened to,” to be “given a voice,” and to “contribute to the research process” is a critical aspect of qualitative inquiry (p.740). Lastly, emotional engagement in this process benefits the researcher. While the purpose of the study was to capture the voices of female superintendents, the researcher desired to conduct qualitative research to learn more about herself as a person and an educational leader. Piotrkowski (1979) explains this important effect on the researcher: “It is presumptuous to think that while those we study change, we ourselves—as researchers—remain untouched by the process” (p.288). As the participants give greatly of their time and experiences, the researcher was personally impacted by their generosity in sharing their stories. Considering the varying manifestations of emotional engagement with and in this study was important for how reciprocity was given and received.

Ethics is another consideration in this research study. Superintendents are public, political figures. Maintaining a positive reputation is critical to their success, and the researcher considered how this impacted the approach of the study. As Lincoln (1993) explains, women’s
participation in this study is a risk: “The silenced who agree to participate in research must also be willing to take the several and profound risks of acting as collaborators in this research” (p.42). Because their stories presented issues of inequality and discrimination in the workplace, maintaining the participants’ confidentiality throughout the entirety of the study was vital. Also, part of ethical behavior is being able to appropriately handle the participants’ emotions. Because participants in this study shared private, emotionally-charged stories, it was critical that the researcher remained stoic as to not jeopardize established rapport and trust. Marshall & Rossman (2016) note that the researcher must be prepared for responding to this type of uncertainty: “…if her questioning stumbles onto highly emotional revelations, she [should be] capable of providing appropriate responses” (p.126). The researcher prepared for this by preparing active listening techniques and thoroughly knowing the variety of possible questions and sequences of questions that can be used. Another key consideration of ethics in qualitative research is there is no way to fully prepare for potential ethical dilemmas prior to engaging in the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that predicting these complexities is difficult due to the “emergent” nature of a “naturalistic study” (p.254). One ethical dilemma the researcher considered prior to engaging in interviews was what she would do if superintendents shared stories of sexual harassment or assault. The ethical dilemma presented here was: what will the researcher do with knowledge of an incident of sexual harassment? Researcher Price (1996) presents the option of maintaining secrecy when confronted with serious ethical dilemmas in qualitative inquiry in order to effectively deal with these realities without harming the participants (p.210). Mitchell (1993) specifically advocates for secrecy in order to confront “privileged, and cohesive groups that wish to obscure their own actions and interests from public scrutiny” (p.54). While it was impossible to anticipate such a dilemma and although it did not occur in the interviews, the researcher had
prepared to probe how the participant handled such situations. There is great responsibility in
telling another’s story; considerations of positionality, reciprocity, and ethics allowed for the
most authentic interactions with the participants and the study’s data.

Data Collection Strategies

In elite interviewing of female superintendents, the researcher aimed to capture women’s
stories of their advancement into the superintendency by asking the questions found in
Appendix A. Included in these questions were prompts to collect demographic data on each
superintendent and prompts to collect their stories about their experiences with gender issues.
Due to the sensitive data the researcher collected, it was vital the researcher prepared for the
interview, established trust, and appropriately conveyed the participant’s value to the study’s
findings. Morgan and Guevara (2008) explain the quality of the interview process is often
determined by the researcher’s ability to establish a relationship with the participant in a short
amount of time (p.728). Of the 14 interviews conducted, the interview lengths ranged from 40 to
90 minutes. The researcher acknowledged considerations of the elite interviewing and qualitative
approach may have conflict with this limited amount of time. Lincoln (1993) explains it often
takes time for participants who have been marginalized to tell their stories. He writes, “It [is] the
inquirer’s role to seek out stories, to engage in listening both active and patient….it sometimes
takes an extended amount of time for the silenced to seek and find their voices, and to frame
their stories” (p.34). To balance a respect for the superintendent’s time while also allowing for
storytelling, the researcher provided each superintendent her phone number and email address in
the IRB consent form to allow the superintendents to contact her upon conclusion of the
interview if they felt any additional information should be shared. Because the data collection for
this study only come from in-person interviews with female superintendents, it was vital that the researcher set conditions that maximize time and efficiency with each superintendent.

**Data Recording Strategies**

Data recording strategies were considered to capture the interview data correctly, and the researcher employed a variety of data recording strategies appropriate to the data being analyzed. For each of the 14 interviews conducted, the researcher traveled to each of the district offices to conduct the interview, and the researcher traveled approximately 3,599 total miles during the data collection process. The researcher asked the participant permission to record the interview on a personal recording device that did not have internet access. Each of the 14 women agreed to be recorded during their interview and each recording was labeled with the interview date only. Along with use of the audio recording of the interview, the researcher had a hard copy of the interview questions and took shorthand, scripted notes. To protect each women’s identity, the audio files were not uploaded from the audio recording device. Immediately following each interview the researcher went to a previously identified location outside but near the district office to complete several tasks. First, the researcher used a headset to immediately listen to the audio one time through. Second, the researcher listened to the audio a second time through and transcribed the audio. Poland (2008) explains the importance and implications of transcription in qualitative research: “[I]n the translation from richly textured lived experience to audio recording to two-dimensional written prose, the data are transformed in ways that have particular consequences for interpretation” (p.884). In considering the importance of audio transcription, the researcher had established a plan for completion. The researcher listened to the audio through the headset and transcribed the audio verbatim. Third, the researcher reviewed the notes taken by pen and paper during the interview process. While the researcher proposed to use NVivo
software offered to UNC doctoral students for analysis, the researcher found this software unnecessary and instead used hand coding on transcribed interview documents for analysis. This also aided in ensuring that the confidentiality of each participant was protected as no data was stored on the internet.

**Data Analysis Strategies**

Analysis of the data collected during the study on gender inequality in the school superintendency followed seven phases. Organizing the data happened throughout the data collection and analysis phases. The bulk of this work was conducted immediately following the elite interviewing. Data was transcribed and organized with dates and times of data collection. Similarly, immersion in the data happened throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data. Marshall & Rossman (2016) explain the researcher should be “intimate” with her data, reading and rereading the data frequently (p.217). After all of the interviews were conducted and the data set was complete, the researcher spent a full month listening to all of the audio recordings while reading hard copies of the transcriptions. The act of listening and rereading of the data following completion of all the interviews adequately prepared the researcher for the third phase of coding the data. Once all the data have been collected and they were all transcribed and in hard copy, the researcher first annotated the data. After annotation, the researcher then identify codes from the data that emerged. After coding the data, the researcher employed the use of memoing to identify how themes in the individual stories were clustered in the coding process. This allowed the researcher to begin generating analyses in the memoing phase. Memoing allows the researcher to “build a puzzle” from the data by “forming ideas” and “deriv[ing] meaning” (Groenewald, 2008, p.505). In this conceptual process, the researcher can begin to “theoriz[e] about concepts, categories, properties, and themes and relationships between
these” (Groenewald, 2008, p.505). After memoing, it was vital that the researcher then searched for alternative understandings of the data to challenge her own positionality and interpretations of the work. Finally, using the memoing completed throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher completed the final report, providing analysis of women’s stories and what they convey about the gender gap in the NC superintendency.

Closing

Gender inequity in the NC superintendency required examination through a qualitative approach. Through the process of elite interviewing, the researcher sought to understand women’s stories, giving them voice to understand how they make meaning of their leadership and providing critical information for making educational administration more socially just. The researcher approached the study with a feminist theoretical framework that emphasized examination of the normalization of femininity and masculinity in the women’s stories. To appropriately examine this problem, the researcher considered issues of population sample, entry and access, positionality, reciprocity and ethics. Additionally, the researcher considered how data was to be authentically collected, recorded, and analyzed. Appropriate methods and considerations of those methods were critical to examine in ensuring that the study can be completed with fidelity.
CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

Engaging in one-on-one interviews with 14 NC female superintendents allowed each
woman superintendent to have voice. By giving each woman time and space to tell her
leadership story, each women’s experiences were valued. While there were many reoccurring
motifs across the 14 superintendent stories, the researcher focused data analysis first using a
narrative analysis approach focused on each individual. Each superintendent story was analyzed
for its unique narrative strategy illustrating how each woman understands and makes meaning of
her leadership. Such analysis does not attempt to determine which narrative analysis is effective
or ineffective; instead, it assumes no superintendent’s approach to meaning-making is right,
wrong, better or worse than the other. It examines how women approach their work in a male-
dominated arena and how they make meaning of their experiences. By analyzing each woman’s
story, the researcher values the individuality of each women’s experiences and their
understanding of those experiences. To combine their stories would overgeneralize their
approach, work counter to the study’s purpose of valuing voice and instead inadvertently add to
the negative stereotyping of women’s approach to leadership. Included in this chapter is the
narrative analysis of each of the 14 female superintendent’s leadership stories. The headlines
used for each section and subsection are direct quotes from significant experiences shared from
the women’s stories representing their narrative approach. By examining each woman’s narrative
strategy, the researcher sought authentic examination of the causes of the gender gap in the NC
superintendency.
Superintendent 1 – Tired of All the Good-Ole-Boy Crap

Having served for years as a female superintendent, superintendent 1 understands the nuances and intricacies of the educational landscape for women in leadership. Her story-telling conveyed a confessional jab at men oppressors; she spoke sharply and without explanation for what it meant to be “tired of all the good-ole-boy crap,” sending an unspoken message that she knew the researcher empathized with her experiences. Simultaneously, her narratives appeared to unconsciously highlight how women both hide and hurt themselves to advance into leadership, all in the name of selfless service for children. Accordingly, she employed a narrative strategy elucidating how preparation, silence and role-playing were used not simply for career advancement but for employing a new form of female leadership. In leveraging this narrative strategy, superintendent 1 makes meaning of her leadership.

Maybe I’m Overcompensating.

Throughout the narration of her experiences, the superintendent leveraged a narrative strategy explaining how a keen focus on preparation was required for success throughout her career. When the researcher arrived for the interview, the superintendent had already printed out the interview questions and had made notes on her handout, explaining to the researcher, “I just wanted to sort of prepare my thoughts for you.” It was the first simple yet poignant indication of a success tactic she was overly accustomed to in female leadership.

The narration of the superintendent’s first interview for a superintendency position set the stage for what she would continue to experience in her career. When she was in a high level central office position in a district, she interviewed and was a finalist for the superintendent vacancy in the district. Simultaneously, she was a superintendent finalist in another district. Torn by what to do, she sought advice from her boss:
Well, I went to my [District B] finalist interview, and the next day I got a call from the Board attorney offering me the job. And so I went into my…boss, the outgoing superintendent who was getting ready to retire and I said, “What do I do? Should I wait? I’ve got two more days until [District A’s] second interview.” And he looked at me and he said, “Bird in the hand?” And I said, “Yes, sir.” And he said, “You need to take that job…and oh, by the way, [District A] wasn’t going to hire you because they weren’t ready for a woman.”

Her boss, the outgoing superintendent, tells her directly that the district is not ready for her leadership or any woman’s leadership. When prodded by the researcher about what her boss had meant from the comment that the district was not “ready for a woman,” the superintendent highlighted the discrimination she had faced by her explanation of what he meant:

…[he meant] that they were going to hire the other [candidate]…. he was… he did not have a doctorate degree or even a master’s degree. He had just an undergrad…. [he] lucked into school[s] and then that’s how he got into the school system… that Board thought it was more important to have… a numbers, finance guy than a school person.

Instead of hiring her, the board determined another male candidate who was a better fit for the district’s superintendent position. The superintendent’s description of this man who secured their district’s superintendency indicates not only her feelings about the loss but also illustrates how preparation has affected her in her school leadership work. Superintendent 1 is highly educated, experienced and knew the work of the school system. Yet, because the board was not ready for a female leader, her male counterpart with less education, less curricular-knowledge, and less preparation secured the position before she did.

This professional wound in which her level of preparedness was overlooked because of her gender helped prepare her to work alongside male politicians later in her career in a
superintendency. She explained that being a female superintendent has required an unrelenting focus on preparedness to assure men she knows what she is doing:

When I would interact with [politicians] or elected officials over there, I would find myself doing way more preparation. And what I mean by that is studying facts and figures. Whether it was the budget or number of teachers or…graduation rate. All those kinds of things because all of those—consequently—gentlemen that were elected officials, whether the commissioner or the mayor or councilmen, umm… treated me very differently….

Employing such a tactic of over preparation allowed her, only over time, to gain some credibility with the men she was required to work with as superintendent. She explained how much time and preparation it took to finally change their conception of her as a female leader:

There…you know, it was just the good-ole-boys. And it took several years for those elected officials to look at me and say, “Oh, well, gosh, that…female actually does know what she’s talking about.” You know for the first two years I got a lot of the, “What are you doing here?” “What do you know?” You know, kind of expressions. So my… my defense mechanism to that is just knowing my information and being able to answer questions and solve problems and really provide you with as much factual or data-driven information… particularly while making decisions.

As the superintendent stated, because she was a woman working with nearly all male politicians, she had to develop a defense. That defense was ensuring she knew as much information as possible to prove she was smart enough to be part of the conversation. Yet even with this amount of preparation, it took significant time for them to recognize her worth.

In reflecting on this narrative strategy of preparedness, the superintendent’s narrative is mixed with varied emotions. She explained why she used this “defense mechanism”:

Just to… you know…
and maybe…
I don’t know.
Maybe that’s overcompensating.
(Laughs.)
But you know just to show you….
yes I really do [know what I’m doing!]

The superintendent’s hesitation explaining the tactic reflects the doubt the men have placed on her. The superintendent herself stated she was overly prepared for each interaction with the male elected officials, knowing every tiny detail about the school system in case she was questioned. Even with this level of preparedness, her diction of “maybe” and “I don’t know” highlights her inability to break through the male-dominated politics. Also, the superintendent explained that she was “overcompensating” through her preparedness; yet, to overcompensate is to make up for something that is missing. But what is it that she is missing? She has the highest degrees, decades of experience, and enormous amounts of preparation. As the superintendent illustrates, she has leveraged a narrative strategy focused on preparation in order to make meaning of her experiences as a female leader.

**How Much Stink Do You Raise?**

In addition to preparedness, the superintendent employed a narrative strategy highlighting various forms of silence throughout the narration of her experiences as a female leader. As described in Chapter II of this study, Skrla (2003) explains how women have been normalized to be “silent” and “unambitious” to be considered appropriately feminine (p.254). For the superintendent, this manifested in her self-described haphazard entry into leadership, the explanation of her experience with a tremendous gender pay gap, her response to inappropriate comments from men, and her explanation of why women may not choose to engage in the superintendency.
When asked about her ascension into the superintendency, the superintendent described her entry into education beginning with the role of classroom teacher. She explained how she moved from the classroom teacher role to a facilitator role and then quickly into an assistant principalship:

   My principal…at the time said,
   “I have an opening for an assistant principal next year. Would you be interested?”
   And I said,
   “No, no, I love what I’m doing, I love being close to the kids and working with teachers.”
   She looked at me and she said,
   “You didn’t hear me, I have an opening and you’re going to do it”…
   … and I of course said, “Yes, ma’am!”

Her movement into the assistant principalship is narrated by the superintendent as something that occurred to her, not something she sought. She described her movement into central office similarly:

   So when I left and finished my doctorate and went back to [the district] and was at an elementary school for a year, [the superintendent] came in and he was visiting schools and he said to me,
   “I’m going to decentralize; we’re going to open these area offices. We’re going to make big feel small, and there will be an area superintendent and an executive director. You’ll have a team of curriculum people, and you’ll support and serve X number of schools depending on where the geographical area was.”
   Well of course at the time I said,
   “Well I just love being a principal.”
   And he said,
   “You’re not hearing me!”
   So, I of course said,
   “Yes, sir.”

Undoubtedly, the superintendent was a talented, high-performing employee, and that was recognized by leadership. The narration around each episode highlights the societal expectation placed on women to not intentionally seek, want, desire, demand leadership; rather, her
successful movement towards the superintendency appears coincidental, as if she gracefully fell into the right place at the right moment. Additionally, in both narrations she describes her reluctance to take the leadership position and her compliance with those in authority, confirming their desires with a “yes, ma’am” or “yes, sir.”

The superintendent’s narrative also highlighted silence as an approach of female leadership in her explanation of a tremendous gender pay gap she experienced while in a central office role. She explained:

I was the fourth highest paid person in [the district]. It was the superintendent, [another high-ranking central office position], a [school based] principal, and me, the other [high-ranking central office position]. There was a $30,000 spread between my salary and the [second highest paid position] salary. and I managed more people, I managed more departments... But you know at what point... how hard do you push? You know, how much stink do you raise? Knowing down the line I wanted to be a superintendent... I didn’t want to be known as you know the woman who is all about money... And you know.... once a year everybody’s salary is printed in the paper and the whole community is a-buzz and you know every year when that happened in [the district] that was always the big talk: “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe [she] is number four... she should be, you know, [in a higher position]” And that there’s such a big spread between my salary and the [other high-ranking central office person’s] salary.

The tremendous difference in pay between the superintendent and her former colleague, a male, who ranked equal to her on the organizational chart provided clear evidence of unfair treatment. The superintendent’s telling of the community’s response to this pay gap as one of shock shows acknowledgment that there was inequity in their pay scales. As has been normalized for appropriate feminine behavior, the superintendent explains she was hesitant to call attention to such a problem because she did not want to raise a “stink.” She had been inculcated to know that
speaking up may lead to her inability to move ahead, as she acknowledged her actions may affect her ability “to be a superintendent.” Also, her response to the gender pay gap she experienced illustrates how men and women have been socialized to devalue women’s financial worth: that women feel a sense of moral obligation to their work as educators and, in turn, they have been manipulated to believe that their pay is not an indicator of their worth to the work.

Another way the superintendent’s narrative strategy is illustrated through issues of silence is illustrated through her experiences with sexism. The superintendent acknowledged sexism was a part of her experience as a female leader, and she described this sexism as manifesting mostly in terms of what men would say to her:

You know there are some, and again it goes back to knowing your context of where you’re working and where you’re serving… There are some people that it doesn’t bother me. For example, when I was in [a former district] there was this very elderly [elected official] … he would call me sweetie—I don’t think he ever knew my name. But the man is 85 years old. So you know, that didn’t bother me. And I knew he wasn’t being….malicious. Or he wasn’t doing it on purpose. Now some of those other gentlemen who were very with-it in their 50s. You know, when they would call me sweetie, hunny, sugar, I would say, “Now, you remember…” And I would tell them my name or come up with some little witty saying.

In these descriptions, men were using terms of endearment towards a female colleague, the superintendent, something that men would generally not do to other men in the workplace; however, towards the female superintendent, it seemed socially acceptable. The superintendent’s description of her response to what she herself described as an example of “sexism” was to attempt to redirect their comments by supplying her name or a funny comment. She is responding exactly how women have been taught to do: in a socially acceptable way, leaving
silent the naming of what the comments truly are: inappropriate, sexist behavior. The superintendent understands that naming the comments risks her opportunity to remain at the table.

Superintendent 1’s narrative strategy of silence was also illustrated in her explanation of the gender gap in the superintendency. When asked to explain her own understanding of the gender gap, the superintendent hypothesized that age may pose a barrier. Due to the short “life span” of the school superintendent, she explained how women may be perceived if their superintendency contract is not renewed and they need to continue to work:

So I wonder and worry that you know, What happens if you get a contract and you do this for 2 or 3 years and for whatever reason if goes awry and you’re 40 years old… you know what do you do? If you’re confident enough you can go back to a principalship or a central office job, but not everyone has that level of confidence… then you run the risk of your colleagues branding you a failure which, you know, I don’t think is the case at all. I’ve got a friend who was a superintendent… and she realized she hated the politics and she’s back [as a different education job and] she loves it…. For a year she battled that image – “Oh you were terrible; you got run out of town,” Which is so unfortunate, because that doesn’t happen to men, you know. For them it’s just: “Oh I made this choice, I needed to spend more time with my family, or I wanted to do this thing.”

As the superintendent explains, it can be the fear of failure, rejection, or public humiliation that keeps women from moving towards the superintendency. While women are publicly scrutinized for their failures in the superintendency, superintendent 1 believes this level of shaming “doesn’t happen to men.” It is the fear of a potentially public failure that keeps women in their roles and, accordingly, keeps them silent. As illustrated through her entry into leadership, the experience of a gender pay gap, her dealings with sexism, and her explanation of why women do not enter the
superintendency, superintendent 1 illustrates how the narrative strategy of silence affects how she makes meaning of her leadership in a male-dominated role.

**I Made Myself One of Them.**

In addition to preparation and silence, superintendent 1 narrated how role-playing affects the understanding of her leadership. The superintendent is cognizant of the ways social expectations of female and male roles and interests affected her behavior leading to and in the superintendency. Her narration of experiences explained how marriage, motherhood, and engaging in stereotypical male interests were all ways she navigates the female superintendency.

The superintendent recognizes that the demands of the superintendency requires tremendous support from one’s spouse and family. She describes the perception placed on her as a woman superintendent when people consider her support system:

That was another thing that sometimes people will say to you as a female superintendent. The first question is: “What does your husband do?” and the second is “How many children do you have?” And in my case when they find out your husband [doesn’t work] they’re all kind of like, “Oh, wow, must be nice.” And I’m like, “You know what? He worked 25 years really hard…and nothing came easy to him, and you know what? No, we don’t have children but like I say now, I am a mother of [large number of] students.”

The superintendent described how her husband’s current lifestyle allowed them the flexibility for her to consider the superintendency because it allowed them the flexibility to move but likewise provided her support in other ways, including cooking dinner at night. Yet while this support is necessary when considering the demands of the superintendency, the female superintendent received judgment for having a husband who does not work and no children, as if her role as superintendent were easier because she did not fit into the appropriate societal expectations of wife and mother.
Also, the superintendent’s narration of the relationship between the superintendency and motherhood revealed its complexity. She stated of motherhood:

[Participant]: You know, I am not a mother, not by choice. It just never happened. Umm… but looking back now I think, had I been a mother, I probably would not have gone all the way to be a superintendent because the demands are so great in this job: The time demands, the stress demands, the family demands, you gotta move, you’ve gotta have a good support system….

[Researcher]: Do you think that….this is an unfair question….do you think that you would have progressed as quickly or would have been as successful had you been a mother?

[Participant]: Probably not. And that is just based on my experience with my friends. Um, some of my friends that I got my master’s with or got my doctorate with, and um, it’s again, it’s the right choices they have made so they could be with their children, so they could have time with their children as opposed to jumping straight into the superintendency chair.

The superintendent freely admits that motherhood would have kept her from the superintendency. She insinuates that motherhood and the superintendency are not compatible due to the demands and time commitment of the job and of the role as mother. Her choice of the word “right” to describe her friends who chose motherhood over the superintendency confirms what societal expectations have taught women: to choose the superintendency over motherhood or to choose both would be wrong.

To navigate the female superintendency, the superintendent understands that relationships with her male colleagues is critical. She acknowledges that establishing these relationships with her male colleagues likewise takes intentionality:

You know, I have really great colleagues, and they treat me like their equal. Um, but that’s not without some work. Do I always, you know when we have meetings, want to stay out late and hang out in the bar? No, but I do.
Do I talk about sports? Yes.  
Do I talk about politics with them? Yes.  
Do I talk about things that are happening with their districts? Yes.  
I have just made myself one of them or made myself fit, if you will.  
And some of my other female colleagues I see haven’t done that…  
and don’t understand that and again I don’t think there is a right or wrong way but  
you know I’ve got some great male colleagues and you know guys that I can call  
for anything, whether it’s professional or personal.

In her description of working with male colleagues, the superintendent explains that it takes
work to build relationships with them. Specifically, she goes out of her way, spending her limited
time and energy to learn what their interests are, even when she does not really want to do so.
She acknowledges that this intentionality allows her to have relationships with her male
colleagues where some of her female colleagues have not been so methodical. When the
researcher asked how her male colleagues had worked to learn about her the way she had learned
about them, she explained:

Yeah, a couple of them especially because they know that curriculum/instruction,
teaching and learning is so close to my heart.  
You know I'm the one they’ll call and ask questions or they’ll call me and say,  
“You know we’re thinking about doing this what do you think about that?”  
Or you know “I’ve got a principal doing this.”

Her narrative describes a transactional relationship with her male colleagues, both to the benefit
of the men and the female superintendent. Admittedly, she states that in these relationships she
has given up herself, stating that she has “become one of them” to make herself “fit.” In her
discussion of these relationships, there was no explanation of the male superintendents going out
of their way to learn more about their female colleagues; rather, their interactions with her were
to gain her expertise around curriculum and instruction.

**A Different Kind of Superintendent.**

Superintendent 1 leveraged a narrative strategy describing her interactions with
preparation, silence, and role-playing in order to achieve a new form of leadership. The
superintendent’s experiences navigating the difficulties of female leadership conveyed her ultimate purpose: to lead differently than others. She had several mentors who guided and supported her leadership, each of whom she learned from which helped mold her own style. Until the interview with the researcher, she “hadn’t thought about” the fact that all of her mentors—“oddly enough”—were men. This realization perhaps provides indication of why her narration was punctuated regularly with explanations of how she would be “different.” She made deliberate choices to ensure her leadership style was inclusive, compassionate, and communicative.

In explaining her ascension into the superintendency, the superintendent recalled when she realized she wanted to lead a school system:

…I had worked for a gentleman named [X] when I was principal in [district name] of two different schools.
And I watched [him] rule from the top down.
And it was at that point I knew I wanted to be a superintendent but I wanted to be a different kind of superintendent.
I wanted to be a superintendent that really talked to the principals and really got their thoughts and their feedback.
[He] came in with the Baldridge concept and you know, “Ye Shall.”
And we were doing it and we were doing it and you know both of my schools ended up being model schools but that’s just kind of the person that I am.
I’m going to embrace something and make it the best it can be.

Having worked with the male superintendent in the district while she was a principal, the superintendent realized her desire to be a superintendent and, most importantly, her desire to lead in a different way than he did. Instead of his approach, she desired to be a superintendent who actively engages her employees, listening to and valuing their opinions.

Additionally, as the superintendent emphasized her leadership capacity throughout her narration, such description was underscored by the motif of teaching and learning. Early in the interview, the superintendent stated that “curriculum has always been” her “passion” and that
“teaching and learning is so close to [her] heart.” Her descriptions provided evidence of placing significant value on a superintendent’s understanding of the core business of school: teaching and learning for students. Her desire to ensure that her work ultimately benefited students is reflected in her narration of the most difficult situation she dealt with as a superintendent:

When I was in [school district name] we built a new high school… And in [school district name], their past practice in building all schools…they had this committee… So as you can imagine out of those 7 people:
A) I’m the only female sitting in the room; and
B) I’d had some experience building a high school when I was in [another district] but I was on the curriculum side from you know helping to order the furniture and all the stuff in the classroom and hiring teachers, that whole teaching and learning end.
So during this whole process from hiring an architect to negotiating the contract to putting out the bid for the general contractor to clearing the first piece of dirt to you know unlocking and opening the doors of school, this committee really, unm… managed, or micro-managed, the whole project. There were two new gentlemen who were on this building committee. One owned a…company, so as you can imagine, he knew everything. And another one was…owned [another kind of company] which he built and remodeled, so again he knew everything. One of the [other committee members] was a builder and [another committee member] was in [the field].
The poor general contractor had no clue—in their minds—how to do the project. Nor did the architect, because these guys knew everything. But we would meet every week and every single week they would come up with something that was wrong, that was incorrect… And while…[we] were out at the project every week, we’re supervising, we’re meeting with the general contractors…nothing.
There was always something.
And it came from one of these four guys.
And it was because of their past experiences.
And none of it had to do with building a high school!
None of it was right; none of it was correct…
And so that was a long, long, long…process…
But that was the most difficult situation and it was a two year, start to finish, situation.
But by the time the school opened and all the students were in it, all those sleepless nights, all those glasses of wine after those meetings… were all worth it because of what it offered the kids.
The telling of her most difficult situation as a female superintendent reveals two dimensions of her leadership style. First, she notes that the men who made the school construction process so difficult presented issues that had nothing to do with “building a high school.” Instead, their interruptions were more a reflection of their own desire to flex their intellectual knowledge about construction. Second, her narration elucidates the strength of her leadership style: her ability to wade through difficulty in order to achieve what is best for students. She articulates that while this situation was long and tedious, ultimately it benefited the most important people in the district: kids.

Finally, the superintendent’s narration about her leadership style emphasized the benefit her form of leadership provides to her employees. When asked about how her employees view her as a female superintendent, she provided an example:

I will say that some of them remark on how I do lead by example and focusing on family. I had a friend who was a principal when I was an assistant principal and she expected her teachers to be there 24/7. She’d send them stuff on a Friday and expect it by Monday. And you know I learned from her – I felt like I hope no one ever thinks I act like you. (Laughs.) That I’m that abrasive and aggressive. Because I want my folks to spend time with their family. If your kid is sick, stay home with them. If you need to take them to the doctor, take them to the doctor. If you need an hour for yourself, take it. If your husband is in the hospital, do it.

An emphasis on work-life balance and a focus on family is present in how the superintendent wants her employees to experience their careers. In this way, she explains how her leadership style benefits employees through her compassion and understanding. By valuing employee opinions, emphasizing the core business of school as teaching and learning, and showing care to her staff, the superintendent narrates her experiences in female leadership as a different kind of
leadership. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, superintendent 1 illustrates how she makes meaning of her leadership through a narrative strategy on employing a new form of leadership while navigating the complexities of preparation, silence, and role-playing in the superintendency.

**Superintendent 2 – Wow! I am a Woman in a Man’s World!**

Superintendent 2 ascended into the superintendency following a successful career in various educational leadership roles. When the researcher invited the superintendent to participate in the study, the superintendent replied to the researcher that she found the study to be “fascinating research” but that she had not had “many challenges…[or] barriers” to the superintendency. Regardless, the superintendent proposed to the researcher the question, “…am I still a good interviewee?” This email introduction established the narrative strategies employed by the superintendent throughout the interview. In recounting her experiences in leadership, the superintendent leverages a narrative strategy elucidating how humble ambition and encounters with unnamed sexism marked her movement into a school district’s top role and allow her to make meaning of her leadership.

**Those Are Shoes I’ve Not Been Able to Fill…Yet.**

The superintendent’s narration of her ascension into leadership, her feelings of inadequacy coupled with optimism, and her quiet, unrealized pride each contextualized how a narrative strategy of humble ambition marked her leadership. She stated that very early in her career she desired to be an educational leader. She said she “knew in [her] first year of teaching” that she wanted to be a principal and that leadership was ingrained in her family dynamics at a young age as her parents were business owners who taught her the “values” of hard-work needed for leadership. While the superintendent established her ambition for leadership early in the
interview, her explanation of her steps through educational leadership juxtaposed her early ambition. This was evident in her description of the male gatekeepers in her work life:

I was encouraged by a male principal whom I taught under to go back and get my administrative degree, and I did under his advisement, knowing that I wanted to leave the classroom at some point anyway. But I only taught school for [a few] years and then I became an assistant principal with aspirations of being a principal. I was only an assistant principal for….maybe [specific number of] years. And then became principal and quickly moved to the central office. I was not in a principalship except for a year and a half. And then my superintendent, who was male, came to me and said, “We’re having an opening as a [specific central office role]. Would you be interested in applying?” I told him initially that I would not, that I loved being principal and I had not been at my school long enough to leave… and he reminded me that we don’t always get to choose when opportunity knocks. (Laughter.) So I did apply for it and I got that job, and so I have spent the majority of my career at the central office level. Then I was encouraged by another male superintendent whom I worked for to get my doctorate degree. And I worked with him in [specific number of] different counties. When he left one county and went to a neighboring one he asked me to come along and gave me a position in the second county, and it was there that I began my doctorate studies under his advisement. And he retired and luckily… within [a short time] of graduating from [name] University with my doctorate, I landed here… as superintendent.

After she had initially established her ambition for leadership in just her first year as teacher, she then describes how three male gatekeepers in her career moved her into the leadership positions. This contrast between her initial ambition for leadership and her movement into leadership through the encouragement of three men illustrates how her narration exemplifies appropriately feminine leadership movement. She portrays herself to be ambitious yet humbly so, being encouraged by male leaders along the way. This was echoed later in the interview when the researcher asked the superintendent to talk about her mentors:
I have always been a people person and I’ve never been afraid of people in leadership. I hope I’ve never crossed my boundaries because I’ve always known that in my career I’ve had a principal or boss to report to. But I’ve always been able to develop good relationships with all of them. So I think maybe just my openness, just demonstrating a high work ethic made those male leaders see that I had a knack for leadership… and luckily they weren’t afraid to encourage me.

In her description of her mentors, all of whom were male leaders, she articulates that her success is attributed to not being fearful of men. She likewise explains that staying in the “boundaries” and establishing relationships with them has allowed them to see her leadership. Her diction in this narration illustrates a sense of compliant ambition: her willingness to not be afraid, her ability to navigate female-male relationships, and her willingness to stay-in-her-lane have allowed her male mentors to see her abilities.

The superintendent’s narrative strategy of describing her feelings of inadequacy coupled with optimism likewise highlighted her humble ambition to and through the superintendency. When the researcher asked the superintendent about the most difficult challenge of being a female superintendent, she explained the difficulty of navigating politics:

I don’t know if this has anything….
let me say two things.
One: I think this school system was ready for a female superintendent; Secondly, I think the most challenging part of my role now is learning the politics. The former superintendent was a master with the political piece, so I feel inadequate a lot of the time….
I know him as he was superintendent here and that was a great strength of his. He could maneuver the politics of the commissioners and just the whole that whole political piece. I don’t feel as comfortable doing that.
Those are shoes I’ve not been able to fill…yet… because I feel like this school system welcomed me as a female superintendent and welcomed the idea of a female superintendent. I don’t think that anyone has held that against me. I think it’s really been a refreshing change.
When comparing her male predecessor’s political acumen to her nascent political skills, the superintendent describes feeling “inadequate.” Such a feeling is produced only when there is an established expectation to which one feels she cannot attain. Her use of the word “inadequate” again highlights her narrations of humility throughout the interview; however, it is important to note her description of filling her predecessor’s “shoes.” In her humility, she describes this political maneuvering skill as “shoes [she’s] not been able to fill” but in her ambition she pauses and states “…yet.” In this strategy, she affirms a male-stereotyped expectation of political savviness that she does not possess yet humbly confirms that it is a skill she will acquire.

The superintendent’s narration of her quiet, unrealized pride also elucidates how humble ambition has marked her leadership as a female superintendent. This was evident in the superintendent’s description of attending a superintendents’ meeting:

> I was stunned at the first state superintendents meeting I went to…. it was apparent to me and I didn’t even think that going into there…it was full of men!! This room is full of men!! There are like 10 women in the room. Then, I sat there and thought, “Wow! I am a woman in a man’s world!” (Laughs.) I started to get a little loud and proud. I still am… even when I read your question this morning about “a woman in a powerful position”… I thought: “Yes I am!” And do men stop and think that? I don’t think so…it’s like they think it’s a right.

When the superintendent is describing her literal walk into the superintendents’ meeting, she acknowledges that she “didn’t even think that” going into the meeting, acknowledging just how “stunned” she was that the room was overwhelmingly full of men superintendents. Upon her realization that this was the makeup of the superintendents, she becomes humbly prideful, describing herself as “a little loud and proud.” In preparing for the interview with the researcher,
she seemed to affirm herself in saying, “Yes I am [a powerful woman]!” Her description illustrates a sense of pride for her exceptional success in achieving the superintendency only once she physically encounters a room that shows how unique it is to be both female and superintendent, almost as if her success throughout her career to that point was unrealized. It is this quiet, unrealized pride that additionally describes the humble ambition she narrates in her description of her female superintendency. As evidenced through her movement into the superintendency, her feelings of inadequacy coupled with optimism, and her quiet, unrealized pride, superintendent 2 leverages a narrative strategy of humble ambition to make meaning of her leadership.

We Had Good Enough Relationships That They Would Often Pick On Me.

In addition to humble ambition, superintendent 2’s narration around unnamed sexism has formed her leadership meaning-making process. After receiving the initial email from the superintendent that she did not feel she had experienced barriers to the superintendency as a female, the researcher approached the interview concerned that the superintendent may not articulate any experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment. Surprisingly, the superintendent described incidents that the researcher perceived as unfair treatment based on the superintendent’s gender. While the researcher will not name these stories as sexism because the superintendent does not, the researcher interprets this narration strategy as the superintendent’s experiences with unnamed sexism. The researcher analyzes such a narration strategy as another example of the superintendent’s need to conform to appropriate societal roles for female ambition in a realm dominated by male leadership and, in turn, allows her to make meaning of her leadership experiences.
This narration strategy was employed by the superintendent early in the interview. When asked about her awareness of being a female leader, she described a difficult work experience in a “good-ole-boy system”:

Yes, I have worked for…this is my [specific number] school district. And in one district in particular I was very aware that I was a woman who had to earn the trust and respect of my male counterparts. It was… as if I may say so without being derogatory… a good-ole-boy system. And I honestly…. I was in that district for [specific number of] years, and I really still question whether or not some of those gentlemen really felt that they had to listen to me, even though I was in a supervisory role. Because it was just tradition in that school system for the men to be at the helm. I felt that for about [specific number of] years in my career.

Her description of “tradition” in the system where men are part of a “good-ole-boy system” which she was not part of caused her to have to “earn the trust and respect” of her colleagues, even ones she supervised. The superintendent describes a clear delineation between male-expected behavior and female-expected behavior in the district. She continued to describe this work dynamic and how she worked to deal with it:

I really made a valiant effort to be personable with them and to learn more about what made them tick. I tried to figure out why they thought that they didn’t need my guidance. Again, it was a struggle. Those [specific number of] years were the most challenging of my career. It’s not that way here; however, there are more women in leadership here than there are men… but still going back to those strategies. I still would never walk away from the table feeling that I wanted to be that good-ole person… That was just not my network. So even though I tried to communicate with them on a level with them that I thought they would be more receptive to my leadership style, I never truly was able to give into that because it’s just not who I am. I’m very goal-oriented and driven to a certain outcome… and they would…
we had good enough relationships that they would often pick on me about…
“Well, [she’s] not gonna let us forget that!” and
“Don’t worry, we’ll get a reminder email!”
Those kinds of things.

There is contradiction in her description of her relationships with the men. First, she articulates there were clearly defined behaviors of what was unfairly acceptable for men versus women in the district. She also describes this work environment as the “most difficult” of her entire career. Yet, when she narrates how she dealt with such inequitable expectations, she describes how her established relationships were “good enough” that the men would “pick on her.” They would tease her for her positive attributes of leadership, such as being organized and helpful. This narration shows that while the superintendent is cognizant of differentiated treatment between male and female workers, she reframes their disparaging comments about her strong work ethic as a consequence of good relationships instead of discrimination. Because women have been expected to accept such environments in which their hard work is stereotyped negatively, superintendent 2 attempts to make meaning of this difficult experience by reframing the sexism positively.

Unnamed sexism was evident also in the superintendent’s description of her difficulty navigating the politics of the superintendency. She told a story about a recent experience with a male politician:

[Participant]: This is the part of the superintendency that intimidates me…. I’ll be quite honest.
I sat at this table on Monday and met with the [a high-ranking politician figure] and [another political figure] was present for the meeting too.
I felt like at the end of the meeting we were all on the same page.
And then when I get to the [specific type of] meeting that very night…the tides turned and what we had talked about flipped on its head and nothing I thought was going to happen in that meeting did.
And so I am a very real person…
and just …
tell me like it is!
Don’t make me believe one thing and then something else happened and leave me guessing why.
So I feel like that’s the way of politicians.
They tell you what they think you want to hear but then at the end of the day it doesn’t work out that way.
I don’t like to guess why something didn’t happen the way it was going to.

[Researcher]: Were they both men?

[Participant]: Yes.
And the [group of politicians] are all …
it’s a [group of certain number],
all [number] are men.
It makes me wonder if they take me seriously….

The superintendent describes experiencing great difficulty navigating the politics of the superintendency role. Specifically, she is aggravated by the male politician telling her he will do something and then acting in a completely opposite way that evening at the political meeting. Her description of the male group of politicians’ perception of her is critical in understanding the narrative strategy she employs. When the researcher asked the superintendent if she had experienced sexism, she stated directly, “I have not.” In her storytelling of the group of male politicians, she questions if they take her seriously, insinuating that the reason they perhaps do not take her seriously is because she is a female leader. It is this narration by the superintendent in which she describes events in which differential treatment and perceptions are articulated as gender-based, yet she does not label or acknowledge them as sexism. This unnamed treatment is a narrative strategy she employs to navigate the superintendency and describe her leadership as a female superintendent. By employing a narrative strategy illustrating her humble ambition and encounters with unnamed sexism, superintendent 2 makes meaning of her leadership experiences as a woman in a gendered role.
Superintendent 3 – How Do You Break Through That? Is That a Female Thing?

Superintendent 3’s career has been characterized by achievement and innovation, both personally and professionally. Having grown up in “poor, rural” America, the superintendent has spent her life working towards a bright future for both herself, her family, and the students of the districts she has served. Throughout her storytelling, the superintendent highlighted how an emphasis on innovation and adaptability of leadership style have led to her and her districts’ accolades. Even with such notable achievements, her narrative strategy was marked by a sense of continually needing to prove herself as a female leader.

Do Something Better Than Anyone Else Can Do It.

Being innovative in the various districts she has served has led superintendent 3 to significant personal and career achievements. She explained that specific innovation work in a district was “great training ground” for the superintendency because of the current necessity to recruit and retain student enrollment in public schools. She explained how in this work she was particularly successful in leading the district and herself to marked growth and achievement:

And so we grew [specialty schools] there…in just a few years…. I didn’t realize that public schools would become so competitive, and marketing [specialty] schools was what I did for all those years. So I was involved with the US Department of Education. I did a lot of webinars for them, toolboxes for them on how to create these schools. I was, um, involved with a national group called [X], and so that kind of… I felt like every year I was learning something that was leading me to a bigger purpose.

This training ground in school innovation and competition led her to the superintendency. With her experience, she notes she has been able to mimic such success in the district she now leads. She explained how uncommon and impactful this type of innovation in the district is:

And so I came back here….
we were able to put in [specialty school themes] K-12….  
I won a national election to become [specific leadership position] of [national organization].  
So we do theme-based schools…  
because we have to compete with home school, charter, and other public schools.  
We are the only district in the area gaining students.  
We are gaining over 5% this year, which is kind of turning that big ship around with all of our innovation.  
So I got really excited about that. I did an interview this morning with [specific town]—[specific town] radio—about equity in public education.  
And the Board here, I had taught many of their children.  
So they knew me as a teacher.  
But I had proven that I could go away, become a leader, and bring all this stuff back to the district.  
So they, um, put their confidence in me as their superintendent…  
Someone gave me the advice early on:  
“Make yourself indispensable to the district, do something better than anyone else can do it, and do things that are very unique,”  
And those things really guided me.  
I was the only one who could bring in 30 million dollars worth of grants,  
but I wasn’t bringing in grants to bring in grants,  
I was bringing in grants to create the vision, to make it happen.  
Well, 80% of the innovations we do are paid for by someone else,  
because we go out to the business,  
we sell them on our [specific program,]  
they pay for our [specific program.]  
We sell them on our [specific program,]  
they pay for the [specific program.]  
So…I think…  
the training I have with competition,  
and we call it collaborative competition,  
where we want every child in the community and the county to have a great education….  
But how are we different?  
And how are we different than the charters and the homeschools?  
And so we’ve brought homeschoolers in.  
We’ve brought 14 families in in the last year.  
Which is huge because most folks are having a hard time for the homeschoolers to come back.  
But we can say we can get you to [a field trip] as one of our experiences…  
that opens people’s eyes.  

The superintendent’s ability to bring innovation to her districts has led to identifiable growth in student enrollment and fiscal resources. Additionally, these innovations led her to personal
success, including involvement with prestigious national organizations, successful elections to national educational organizations’ boards, and features in publications. Throughout her narrative about such innovation, she explains how these helped propel her into the superintendency: as she describes herself, it provided the necessary “proof” that she was a leader. It showed the community that her ability to innovate could lead to success for the district. The superintendent employed her work with innovation and its correlating successes as the foundation for her ability to lead.

**To Get Students to Win, You May Absolutely Have to Act Like a Man.**

In addition to the superintendent’s emphasis on her ability to achieve success through innovation, she highlighted her adaptability as vital to her district’s success. Throughout her narration, it was clear the superintendent was keenly aware of the impact of her behavior and how she needed to adapt her behavior based on her audience.

While considering her relationships with colleagues, the superintendent contextualized her leadership adaptability in relation to women and men. She explained the differences in competition and also how that competition changed between serving as a central office staff member to superintendent:

I’ve always gotten along better with males than I have females. So because in most of the situations where I’ve been the female and it’s been other females, there’s been more competition. So if we’re all directors and we’re all females, it wasn’t as easy as if there were some males. Because the males…I don’t know…don’t feel as threatened by you. Which means you can take advantage of that. *(Laughs.)* So….I’ve always worked well with males. Now. Have I met condescending males? Absolutely. But I’ve met more males that have encouraged me to be seen as their equal.
So I think that’s different and unique that they don’t seem to have as much drama all the time, the males.
And I like that.
So, as I’ve gotten into the superintendency,
I’ve been intentional about making friends who are females who are superintendents to encourage them.
And so probably the ones that I’m closest with as superintendents are female.
‘Cause we don’t need to compete against each other.
They’re at their district; I’m at my district…
and we need to learn and grow from each other.
Every once in awhile you’ll walk into a meeting with a bunch of males on the Board of Directors,
and you’re the only female and they won’t look at you or take your opinion.
That does happen.
But I think that’s a lot better than it used to be.
So I don’t have any problem working with males.
If they’re condescending and rude,
they’re often condescending and rude to the other males.
They’re just…you know.

In describing her relationships working with women and men as a central office administrator,
she highlights that she found women to be more competitive with one another in their work. The superintendent notes that when she worked with men at the central office administrator level, she was able to “take advantage of” the fact that the men were not scared of a woman’s abilities.
This highlights both the men’s perceptions of women’s inability to lead or to be noted as leaders and likewise demonstrates the superintendent’s savvy maneuvering of her work environment. In noting that the men were not threatened by her, she was able to capitalize on the opportunities to demonstrate her strong leadership. She does acknowledge in her description, however, that there still remain times when men will not value her presence or opinion. Interestingly, once she moved into the superintendency, she notes that her fellow female superintendents were the collaborative colleagues while the men were suddenly competitive with the women, as if women’s attainment of the superintendency became a threat of the men’s power. Accordingly,
the superintendent notes as a female superintendent her collaboration then became primarily with women, working together to help each of their districts to be successful.

Throughout her narrative, the superintendent explained how her ability to “size up the group” and “negotiate” has provided her tremendous success. She explained she learned about her awareness of how interpersonal skills and stereotypes of gender were related based on a memorable interaction with her former superintendent:

So….you just size up the group and you just…
because I used to think that to argue with a male was a bad thing.
And I can remember again,
[myn former superintendent] arguing with me vehemently…
And later after the meeting I thought,
“Oh my gosh!”
And he would say,
“That was great! I’m so glad you spoke up!”
But it felt like he was mad at me!
You know, I thought…
All those arguments with my dad growing up trained me to actually get the negotiation through which I find males do more than females.
If I’m arguing with a female it’s usually a personal deal.
It’s not a…to try to get my point across.
I feel like it’s…like you’re attacking me.
You know….so I never argue with females.

The superintendent explains how she learned how to adapt her negotiation tactics for or with men colleagues versus women colleagues. She learned from her former male superintendent that there was value placed by men on the ability to argue and negotiate, that arguing with men was seen as a strength and even, perhaps, as enjoyable. In her description of learning this lesson from her former superintendent, she explains that after that initial argument, she felt uncomfortable.

She acknowledged that her reaction—“Oh my gosh!”—was that her boss was mad with her, as if she had done something wrong. It was in this incident she began to understand how to negotiate with powerful men through argument. Though she learned such value, she likewise admitted it did not translate to an ability to argue with women, which felt more like a personal attack rather
than a discussion about their work. It demonstrates her ability to adapt her behavior for success as a female leader.

The superintendent also explained that her work with publically elected officials required a similar intelligence in leadership adaptability. In understanding her audience, she leverages her adaptability to form relationships and ultimately benefit the students in her district. She explains how she works so well with politicians:

The biggest surprise for me is how well I work with the [locally elected politicians].
So it goes back to the reason I’m on the [national organization] board.
So I go into them, they’re all older white males. Republican.
So I go in…I listen.
I know…I tell them that I’m a [specific kind of] daughter.
That immediately helps.
Then I explain that some of the things we’re doing as a nation are hurting children and it’s not what I would have wanted to do in my Baptist faith.
And you kind of layout their conservative viewpoint and then you kind of spin it to…
here’s some things that we need to be doing for children.
So you move them more towards a moderate conversation to where we don’t get into politics.
We get into what is good for children.
I listen to them.
I spend time with the [politicians].
I bring them to the schools.
I bond with them on things in which we are alike.

The superintendent’s keen awareness of her audience allows her to work well with the locally elected politicians. She works to understand how she can relate to the politicians, even if they have opposing political views. Identifying similarities that exist between them, she leverages these commonalities and grounds their conversation in ensuring that all of their actions are for the benefit of students. In her narration of working with the politicians, she explains that her faith is used as an entry point for working collaboratively. Interestingly, she specifically identifies herself as a daughter. To the researcher, the term daughter may conjure a sense of compliance,
loyalty in this illustration and to the politicians. Considering the counternarrative, if the superintendent had been a male in this scenario, it is interesting to consider if the male would have to build relationships with locally elected politicians around an image of being a son. It is not possible to know if the relationships success is built on their common faith or a combination of the faith and also the politicians’ acceptance of a female leader who identifies herself as youthful, innocent, and compliant. This analysis does not suggest that the superintendent acts in a way she should not; rather, it suggests that male politicians may be threatened by female superintendents unless they portray themselves in such unthreatened, subservient ways.

In learning this adaptability of leadership style, the superintendent explained how navigating varied approaches based on the audience is done ultimately for the best interest of students. She explained this process:

So…I think I take a lot of time when I meet with a group to size up the group before I get involved. So, the first year of superintendency you don’t say much of anything even though I’m very outspoken. You just listen and you pay attention and then I try to find who is like-minded…. And so, to do that, you hide yourself a lot of times until you trust them. And then you find out what that group would listen to. Because the most important thing is for students to win. And so, if you’re trained to get students to win, you may absolutely have to act like a male. And if you have to act like a male, which means you’re aggressive, you’re dominant, you want to say how you feel… what you find is other males like that. You know, from males but not necessarily females, right?.... So I think that’s what you know will actually get the children winning in the end even though it may not be your nature.

In her description of doing what is best for students, two interesting points arise. First, the superintendent acknowledges that when she first became a superintendent, she had to “hide” herself. She explains this tactic is used to ensure she can get a sense for who is trustworthy and also to understand what others will “listen to.” Ultimately, she acknowledges she, for a time
period, strips herself of who she is in order to adapt. Second, the superintendent acknowledges that once she brings herself to the table, she adapts her behavior to “act like a man.” In doing so, she acts in “aggressive” and “dominant” ways, which other men in the arena appreciate. These characteristics on hiding herself, reading the group, and acting in stereotypical male ways allows her to help students “win.” Surely male superintendents do not have to hide themselves or act in stereotypical female ways to achieve success in the superintendency.

**You Almost Have to Prove That You Have The Same Skills As Everybody Else.**

Even in the midst of significant innovation and notable achievements, the superintendent’s narrative strategy was marked by a sense of continually having to prove herself yet still not being good enough. The superintendent explained this mindset comes from her formation as a young child:

> Plus, innately growing up in rural [specific state] just in my… no one having gone to college before me… I think I’ve always tried to prove myself. So if you come in with this attitude that you’re going to prove yourself all the way through school… And then you graduate top of your class, get a full scholarship, you still don’t feel like you’ve landed. You still feel like you’re proving yourself. I remember when I got my [doctorate] thinking, “Nobody can take this from me….I’ve earned this.” So there is an innate thing that a female from a rural, high-poverty area… that you almost have to prove that you have the same skills as everybody else.

The superintendent’s ambition is derived foundationally from her upbringing in rural [state]. In such a setting, with no one in her family having gone to college before her, she felt a need to achieve. Even in achieving high marks and getting a full scholarship to college, she still felt inadequate. She describes the success of achieving her doctorate as an accolade that could not be taken from her, as if it is a prized possession that finally achieved something worthy enough to
put her on par with others from non-rural communities. She acknowledges that specifically being female from a poor, rural area gives her a feeling of needing to prove that she has the same skills as everyone else in leadership.

Surely this upbringing gives her the drive to continually seek achievement, as the superintendent likewise highlighted examples of still not feeling good enough even in the midst of notable achievement and district gains. While she notes she works exceptionally well with local politicians, something many of the study participants acknowledged as a difficulty in the superintendency, she also wonders how her relationship building with them may not be as successful as she hopes:

So it didn’t matter about my gender. What mattered to them was that I could relate to them. If you always go back to the children and show them how it connects to the children. But then you think…are they giving me as much facilities support as some of the other districts? And should I fight more for that? I mean, does it help that they work well with me? Or you know…where’s that? I’m only [specific number of] years in… I think you…over time…you see what you can get for your district but you don’t do it all in [the early] years.

The superintendent’s narrative strategy in this illustration highlights her self-doubt about the strong relationships she had worked to build with the locally elected politicians. After describing her strong relationships with them, she begins to question if such relationships have caused her to not have received as much financial support as other districts have. She questions whether or not she should “fight” more for such fiscal resources. Interestingly, she had described how she worked to build relationships with the older, white male politicians by finding commonality of their faith and explaining that she was daughter; yet while this helped to create strong working relationships, she questions if this has led to a taking-advantage-of from the same politicians. She
wonders, perhaps, if she should adopt the stereotypical-male behavior to fight for such fiscal resources that her students need.

Additionally, in the face of such innovation and achievement in her district, the superintendent’s narrative strategy highlighted how her voice was not acknowledged or valued in the way she feels it should be. She explained:

But I would say sometimes your voice is not heard across the state as a female. You might have one or two that speak out for all the females but I don’t believe that we all have a voice… and I’ve wondered if that’s because I come across aggressively or if it’s because I’m only [a few] years in. But when I go to [specific city], people almost always give me a voice and put me speaking to groups, and interacting. But in the state, you might or might not get invited to do something. And I’m like, how do you break through that? Is that a female thing? A new superintendent thing? And you’re almost thinking… I’ve proven myself on a national stage yet in the state you feel like… You know, and why don’t you come to the schools that get the top growth in the state…the districts…and ask them what their class size is and how they make it work. And I don’t know how many times I preach that to you know, [name], and all these other folks… and yet they don’t come to the schools that are getting the highest growth in the state. They often base it off the urbans, regardless.

The superintendent points out she has led her district to have schools with some of the highest growth in the state, yet her voice is not valued on the state level. Additionally, she explains how on a national stage where she is active in a national organization, she is valued as an important representative who is called on for her expertise yet that same value is not acknowledged in the state in which she is a superintendent. In describing these issues, she acknowledges her gender is likely the reason for such a lack of voice. Additionally, she questions whether her “aggressive” style is the culprit for not being valued. In these descriptions, she acknowledges that as a female
superintendent she is continually needing to prove herself to be the best and yet she still feels as if the value placed on her is not commensurate with the level of achievement she has gained. Superintendent 3 illustrates in her leadership story a narrative strategy of achievement and innovation while still having to continually prove herself. In such an approach, she makes meaning of her leadership as a woman in a gendered role.

Superintendent 4 – I’m Wearing My Green Thong

In superintendent 4’s district, she was hired by the board to allegedly stop “the games,” yet she continues to face seemingly insurmountable challenges to effect necessary change. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, Superintendent 4 illustrates how both self-described “game-playing” and dealings with sexism and discrimination have presented difficulties in her day-to-day management of the school system. To combat these dual barriers, she describes her leadership approach as maintaining the highest integrity and dealing with issues directly, yet nuanced throughout her story are punctuations of self-doubt caused by the injustice around her. In such a leadership approach, the superintendent makes meaning of her female leadership as one marked by bravery in the face of challenge to ensure a better future for the children in her district.

I Didn’t Realize I Would Fight as Many Battles as I Have to.

Much of the superintendent’s narration of her leadership experiences was marked by stories in which she deals regularly with game-playing by adults. She explains that being a female superintendent has been extremely “challenging” and acknowledges this challenge is due to the micro- and macro-politics of the role. Through her interactions with so many varied stakeholders, she finds that the political challenges run counter to her leadership style. She described this difficulty in relation to adult expectations of her role as a female superintendent:
Lots of people want me to be different things to them…
and I find that very difficult…
because I really have been the same person just with different degrees and titles
all the way. Um…
Um, some people want me to be in their buildings all the time as the superintendent.
And then some people perceive that as micro-managing them,
that I am trying to do that.
I have a group of political figures in the county who want me to be a politician.
And I find that I am not very good at that.
So that is difficult.
I don’t do a lot of back-scratching.
I don’t make promises to people about jobs.
The only thing that I will ever be willing to promise someone is an interview.
If they are interested in a position that that comes with no commitment to whether
they are hired.
And sometimes board members, commissioners, other political figures…
they want more than I am willing to give….
I didn’t realize I would fight as many battles as I have to.

Early in the interview, the superintendent established in her narration the difficulty of her
job and managing the political nature of such a “high profile” position. Interestingly, she
explained her belief that the board hired her as its superintendent to stop the political game-play,
yet she described interactions with the board in which they continued to play such games. She
explained why she believed the board chose her, a female leader, to combat these perceived
issues:

Um…and the board—I’ll be honest with you.
I think that the board had seen enough games played that they thought:
Well here is a woman, she is on the inside, she’s worked her way up…
She has the guts to handle it.
And I think that honestly they hired me with the intention that I would clean some things up.
Now what I am finding with my board,…
somethings that they want me to clean up and somethings they want me to leave alone.
And sometimes for me it is hard to decide which is which…
because I think that I was hired to be a leader of integrity, an ethical leader, a fair leader.
And so sometimes when you commit to those things you ruffle some feathers.
While she believes that the board hired her, a woman “with guts,” to handle tough situations, she explained she has had encounters with principals, board members and other politicians who will actively undermine her authority. One such example of this involved employees’ and the board’s interaction with a former employee. She describes this as the most difficult experience of her superintendency:

I don’t know if it has anything to do with being a female but…
A former [important school employee] has stayed too connected to the system, and he gave advice as I took different positions, you know when I left the school where I was principal, um, to just walk away and have very little or no interaction for a period of time. And I have found that he has not been able to do that.
Part of that is on him.
But part of it is [other employees] reaching out to him when they got their wings clipped from me,
or [something] wasn’t what they wanted it to be with me,
then that’s who they went to.
I’ve even had [specific politicians] reach out to him:
“What do you think about X?”
And I’ll say, “Why did you feel it necessary to reach out to him?”
…you know some of those relationships, and just some behind-the-scenes things.
That has been the most difficult part for me just as the superintendent.
I really don’t know if it has anything to do with me being female.
Maybe it does.
I don’t know.

As the superintendent describes the most difficult part of her superintendency, she bookends her narration by questioning if this challenge comes from being female. She acknowledges that the board hired her, a woman, to stop the political gameplaying yet the most difficult aspect of her work is such gameplaying from the people who hired her. It causes her to question how she makes meaning of her role as a female superintendent.

These games continued in her interactions with employees and her superintendent colleagues, as well. She describes how her directness with employees was met with resistance:

I’ve had some things happen, uh, with, uh, a couple of [employees]…
As far as I know that they have done things behind my back that would have never been tolerated from my male predecessor. Like… as far as reaching out to board members behind my back.
And then board members tell me that it’s happened. Reaching out to commissioners, um… just this game playing kind of thing. It was almost like when momma told them no, a couple of them, they weren’t used to being told no. They weren’t even used to being held to the same standard as some of the other [employees]… and the one thing that I am: I am hard, but I am fair. So if it is good for one, it is good for all, and some of them have had an issue with that… I’m the type of person, you see how I come to my meeting with you. When I am in meetings whether it’s a principals’ meeting, uh, whether it is [professional development], whatever it is I’m taking notes… So I never do things without documentation, and they know that… And still because nobody ever told them they have room for improvement in [many] years… and it’s because people didn’t have real conversations with them and truthful conversations… that it is awfully hard to hear for the first time.

In her narration of these difficult interactions with employees, she acknowledges that such behaviors from employees would not have been “tolerated” under the former male superintendent. Her description of the employees upset with their “momma” is poignant: as the perceived mother, she is subservient to the symbolic father who, in these instances, is a former important school employee. When her children are upset, they run to him for safety. Again, as the superintendent works under the guise of allegedly cleaning up game-playing, employees and others interact both with and against the female superintendent in unproductive, unsupportive ways.

This motif was reflected also in the superintendent’s narration of her interaction with her male superintendent colleagues. While less consequential to her day-to-day role as superintendent, these collegial interactions likewise affect how she makes meaning of her female
leadership. When asked about her male superintendent colleagues, she narrated how the
dynamics of gender affect working relationships:

Well, this is an example:
We just came back on Monday evening from a two-day meeting.
We had our superintendents’ quarterly meeting, and that’s a statewide meeting.
It was in [city], and, uh, I looked in that room for a state meeting,
and it was very similar to my regional meetings:
And that is the women had a cluster at a table or two.
You have one or two seated at a table of men, but it is pretty segregated.
As far as these meetings, um…
They tolerate me, um, would be my best description.
Um, they are not disrespectful to me, but, you know, one was bragging about
taking twenty some to the golf course the day before…
I didn’t get an invitation to go kind-of-thing.
You know I’m not a member of the club.
I don’t desire to be, and so I think because I know that I don’t have to say it, if
that makes sense.
They know that I’m not interested.
Um…..even friendships with the men, it’s very superficial.
Like, “Hey, how’s your wife?
How are your children?
How did he do in college this semester?”
Just very surface kind of things.
I don’t have any real male friends in the superintendency.
But now if I called them, they would help me. They would.
If I needed advice about something, if I am looking for someone to offer
[professional development], maybe I want someone to facilitate something with
leadership, oh they would be very quick to help me and to give me information,
but, um, it’s not chummy, and part of that is me.
I have no desire to go play eighteen holes of golf.…
So, um, I don’t know it’s just, it’s odd, the relationship…
it’s odd but it’s not disrespectful.
None of them are disrespectful to me.

In this narration, the superintendent’s gender not only results in her being outnumbered at the
superintendent’s meeting, her gender also causes her to be excluded. These superintendents, in
their literal games of golf, exclude the women in the figurative game that is the professional
network of the superintendency. While she acknowledges the men would help connect her to
resources or answer questions if she were to call, she understands being a woman excludes her
from having meaningful relationships with her male colleagues. Whether the interactions are with the board, employees, superintendents, or other politicians, the superintendent narrates several instances in which her sense of leadership as a female superintendent is questioned because of her gender.

**They Don’t Know What to Do With You.**

The second significant barrier the superintendent faces in her superintendency is varied forms of sexism and discrimination. Throughout her narration, she described several instances in which she was treated differently and inappropriately for being a female leader. These forms of sexism and discrimination occur in a myriad of ways, including interactions with male politicians, issues with her pay, and perceptions and interactions she has with the public.

Almost at the beginning of the interview, the superintendent openly and quickly acknowledged that she knew her gender was the cause of friction in her work with male politicians. She told a story of learning this fact the hard way when she simply asked a confidant what was wrong with the dynamic between her and the politicians:

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Sometimes the relationship is not good….
not so much with [specific politicians].
It’s pretty good with [them]…
and the reason being is because they know me better than any of the others do or probably ever will.
They work more closely with me…. Um so, um, but I have just quite frankly asked some folks:
“What’s the issue here?”
You know I don’t typically have a hard time building relationships.
I’m very much, I’m very collaborative,
and would rather go into situations as a team than just by myself,
because I know the better decisions will be made.
The more heads you have at the table discussing things, discussing barriers, how to overcome barriers, planning, implementing, and then evaluating things.
The more people you have involved in that the better it will be,
the more successful it will be…
So I’ve always led that way, but there have been difficulties even in communicating with some of my colleagues…
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and I’ve have asked former [politicians]:
“What am I doing wrong? What is the problem here?”
And the answer that I have been given on more than one occasion is:
“They don’t know what to do with you.”
And I said, “What is that supposed to mean?”
And this is what is said to me, has been said multiple times:
“You’re intelligent and you’re pretty,”
is how a couple of men have described me,…
And they said
“That’s the problem.”
And I said,
“So if I were ugly and dumb it would be better?”
Of which there is never an answer.
But these are men telling me, you know, one didn’t say pretty he said,
“You’re good looking and you’re smart. That’s the problem here.”
And I honestly I don’t know how to fix that problem because…
You know, it’s not my problem.
It’s theirs to fix, but, um…
but it makes things difficult…

As the superintendent recognizes and attempts to resolve the conflict she feels with local politicians, she discovers it is an issue of sexism and there is simply nothing she can do to resolve it. The men have a difficult time working with her because her intelligence and beauty are intimidating to them. As a female leader, after decades of hard work to achieve the superintendency against unlikely odds, the superintendent then has to navigate a political realm in which others are unable to work with her because of her looks and gender. Even when she challenges their sexism, her counter statement of, “So if I were ugly and dumb would it be better?” is met with silence. While the superintendent has been able to get to the superintendent’s table, she is excluded from engaging in the work simply because of her gender.

Another way in which the superintendent is treated inequitably is in her pay. The superintendent acknowledges women in the superintendency are not treated as equals to men. She provides an anecdote about her salary, showing how this inequity is displayed:

I think the first thing that,
I don’t know that we can do,
but as a whole is to treat [women] as equals, because I can tell you we are not. We pretend we are, but we’re not. My base salary is about $25,000 less than the superintendent that was here, not immediately before me, but the one before him… And when [a person] politely brought that to someone’s attention the response was:

“Well that was Mr. So-and-so.”

And then she said,

“So you’re saying [superintendent 4] is not as qualified as Mr. So-and-so?
She has a doctorate.
She worked her way up the ranks, and has held every position… she knows the system better than maybe anybody who has ever been here before, so you don’t think she’s equal to that?
She’s not deserving of that?”

And then they start backing off:

“Well, I didn’t mean that,”
you know, kind of conversation.
So I think that if the powers that be, be boards or whomever would treat us as equals and to make women—
and to put it out there that we are comfortable with a female leader and they will be treated and compensated in the same manner—
I think that would help…

The glaring pay gap in salary between the superintendent and a previous male superintendent provides evidence of sexism that the superintendent faces as a woman. When women are paid less—and as superintendent 4 is in this case, significantly less—than their male counterparts, women and their work are grossly devalued. Additionally, facing such sexism causes the superintendent to doubt how parity in treatment between women and men can be achieved. In narrating this anecdote, the superintendent again questions the ability for women leaders to be treated as equals to male leaders, starting her anecdote with “I don’t know that we can do…”

This questioning is not a result of the superintendent’s disbelief; rather, it is a result of a discriminatory environment in which she leads.

In addition to the male-dominated political realm, the superintendent likewise faces issues of sexism in public perception. She explains how her gender causes her to daily focus on what she is wearing based on her schedule and how the public will receive her image based on
her clothing. The superintendent explained how seemingly trivial aspects of her life, such as clothing and looks, have led to painful wounds in her leadership. After being named the first female superintendent, such questioning of her clothing was just one aspect of an overall questioning of her ability to lead the district:

When I was named superintendent there was another…
candidate who [was known to the community.] Okay…. 
Um, and….um…
immediately some women took to social media,
women that I do not know…
some of them I would not know if they walked in here today.
But [they] took to social media and they created a chart on social media where they had the male candidate and they had me.
They had it divided, you know, down the middle and had his credentials.
He was even presented as the insider.
And he came to North Carolina from [another state.]
I have been born and raised here.
So, he was the insider, I was the outsider.
He had these credentials.
They didn’t even have my credentials correct.
You know I’d only taught for two years and things….
They elevated him.
He was a Christian man, as if I were not a Christian kind-of-thing…
and my dress was a big topic on social media,
because my skirts were too short,
and my heels were too high.
So those are some real life examples.

This sexist attack on female leadership through social media represents the difficulties women face not only in their ascension into but also in the superintendency. Because of the superintendent’s gender, her experience, religion, and appearance are all publicly challenged. Not only are these aspects of the superintendent’s life challenged, they are also intentionally misrepresented to undermine both her ability to lead and her credibility with the public. As the superintendent stated, it is unlikely that people “on social media are discussing what male superintendents are wearing.” These additional difficulties female leaders face privately and
publicly make the superintendency challenging and, inevitably, less attractive to prospective female candidates.

The superintendent likewise narrated examples of blatant inappropriate behavior from men towards her due to her gender. She illustrated the most intense example of such inappropriate behavior through an anecdote about receiving a card in the mail:

Well, I have to share this with you.
It can either be on the record or not….
After spring break, I came back to the office…
and my secretary always sorts my mail for me.
She doesn’t open my mail but you know she sorts it by the type.
And when I was back and going through my mail, I noticed this card 
(*Holds up green envelope*)
and I saw the return address on it, and I knew the person it was from, and I thought, “That’s weird.”
Because I could tell it was a greeting card because of the type of envelope it was.
So I opened the card.
(*Opens the card and pulls out the card*)
And I look at it and I read it.

(*Holds it up and begins to read it to researcher. There are two old people on the front of the card, a man and a woman.*)

And here’s the front and it says,
(*The man on the card says to the woman:* “Martha, another year and you aren’t in the spirit. Where is your green for St. Patrick’s day?”

(*Opens it up.*) ….

(*The woman says to the man:* “Don’t worry, I’m wearing my green thong.”

(*Closes card and put it back in the envelope.*)

(*Long pause.*) And inside the card was this man’s business card.
And I know who he is and that he’s a business man in town.
Now tell me, do you think that a male superintendent would ever get something like this?

Here is a woman, our superintendent, who is a powerful, visible, and political figure in her community, receiving a sexual greeting card in the mail at her office from a male in the business
community. Such a scenario generates a variety of questions: why would a man find it appropriate to send such a card?; what was his intent in sending the card?; would a male superintendent ever receive such a card?; how should the female superintendent respond? Perhaps more importantly, however, the card represents a threat to female leadership. It establishes the woman as a sexual being subservient to the power of men. Even though she has become the most powerful employee in the school district, the superintendent is vividly reminded that she is, to men, simply eye candy in a green thong. Such messages inevitably put women in secondary roles to men and create barriers to and in the female superintendency.

I Don’t Play Games, and I Don’t Talk in Code.

As women leaders often do, superintendent 4 has established personal strategies for combating the difficulties she faces as a female leader. In the face of game-playing and sexism, she characterizes her leadership style as one marked by integrity and purpose. Superintendent 4 attempts to model this form of leadership in a variety of arenas, including with politicians, the children in her district, girls in her community, and for herself.

To face and counter the political game-play, superintendent 4 strategically takes issues on directly and without hesitation. After the superintendent described the political “back-scratching” as the most difficult challenge she faces in the role, the researcher questioned how she deals with such a challenge. In response, she describes her approach as ensuring her leadership is one of integrity and boldness:

[Researcher]: …what kind of strategies do you bring to deal with those issues?

[Participant]: a high level of integrity. And I am pretty quick to put my cards on the table. I don’t play games, and I don’t talk in code. I try to communicate clearly what I bring to the table, and I put those cards on the table with people. And sometimes that works well and sometimes it doesn’t.
Sometimes people are a little intimidated by that, when I just put it on the table: this is what I am willing to do and that’s it.

Notably, the superintendent describes that her response to political game-play is to engage in the game with directness, integrity. She responds clearly by putting her “cards on the table” instead of “playing games” or “talking in code.” Likewise, she understands that such directness from a female is met with intimidation, as directness from a female leader is viewed as inappropriate. While she recognizes this strategy is not always successful, she finds solace in knowing she will have worked with integrity and for the betterment of students:

I’ve never been worried about being terminated, because I’ve never allowed anyone to have anything on me to terminate me for… And I started this position with a commitment that I would do what is right and good for the children of this school system… and if someone wants to terminate me, buy out my contract whatever they want to do as long as I was doing what was good and right for the children of [this district], I’ll land on my feet somewhere…. And so I just decided that if I am going to go down, what better reason to go down than to do what is good and right for children and just see where it falls.

Ultimately, the superintendent’s daily work is driven by a purpose much larger than her own success. She works to ensure the system in which she works is best for students in her district. Accordingly, her leadership strategy and, in turn, her narrative strategy in how she makes meaning of her leadership is to lead with integrity, boldness, and bravery in the arena of politics.

Not only does Superintendent 4 employ a leadership strategy of integrity to survive the political arena, she likewise does so to combat the stereotypes of female leadership to ensure a better future for children. To illustrate such a necessity, she narrated an example of a child’s perception of leadership during a school visit:

I’m committed to be a role model for girls, for little girls… I was going to one of the schools and this was a pre-planned kind of visit so they made me cards…. and the thing that just intrigued me was a fifth grader drew me as a medical doctor because they said that Dr. [superintendent 4] is coming.
I was a medical doctor, had a stethoscope around my neck, and I was a male with a beard.…
So we have to do a better job I think of educating and, uh, breaking down those stereotypes with our children.

The superintendent’s narration of this story serves to highlight the need to ensure our children understand female leadership. In this story, the fifth grade student drew what he or she understood adult leadership to be: a man with a beard. It helps focus the superintendent’s purpose in ensuring that young children can see women, and themselves, as leaders.

While the superintendent recognizes her daily work is to ensure an excellent education for all students in her district, she also recognizes the specific need to model effective leadership for girls. Although she has no children of her own—something she describes as “the biggest disappointment of [her] life”—she takes the opportunity to model effective female leadership to the girls in her family and her district. To do this, she ensures she works “smarter” and “harder” than anyone else in the organization. She explains this is part of how she makes meaning of her female leadership and, in turn, exemplifies for girls what it means to lead:

Um… I think that something we’ve always maybe even subconsciously taught little girls is that: be prepared to work harder and be smarter than the boys, and that that’s the way you’ll get ahead. I don’t see myself as being any different. Um, my administrative assistant, [name,] has worked for [number of] superintendents… and she will tell you hands down that I work harder than any of the [others] before me. And part of that’s me, because I want my hand in it. I want to know enough about it that if somebody asks me anything about this system I can give them an educated answer. Some people don’t want that. So see part of that is on me as far as my personality. I do not want anyone managing my calendar. I want to do that myself. I do not want anyone going through my email. …I don’t want anything to slip through the cracks, and I don’t really think that is anyone’s responsibility but mine.
Uh, do I stay behind with email? Absolutely.
But be ready.
You’re gonna have to be smarter and you’re gonna have to work harder.
And I think that that’s something that I tell [young girls in my family.]
First of all, I expect them to be hard workers.
Um, that that’s just that work ethic and that’s all I’ve ever known. I’ve worked,
since…I’ve worked a paying job since I was twelve.
So that’s just kind of who we are as far as a family.
But I’ve told them that you’ll only have what you are willing to work for, and if
you want to do anything with leadership:
be smarter and work harder.
It’s the highest profile position in the system.
You will always have someone mad at you, for whatever reason.
And because you’re a female sometimes you’re a target.
So go into it knowing that.
Go into it and again be smarter.

Her leadership strategy and, accordingly, her narrative strategy to combat the difficulties of
female leadership is to work harder and smarter. She models this leadership for girls to show
them female leadership is possible. Regrettably, she describes such a work ethic that must be
better than a man’s as the expectation for securing leadership as a woman, because women are
often “a target” for others. Regardless, she acknowledges such integrity in female leadership
shows young girls it is possible for them to lead.

In addition to leading with integrity and purpose for the children in her district and
community, superintendent 4 recognizes she must be committed to ensuring she likewise
supports and elevates other women. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, she
recognized she often faced leadership challenges created by other women. Having dealt with
such instances, she self-reflects on the need to change her own perceptions of women leaders,
especially in their interactions with men:

But I think the other thing we can do is to make sure that, um…
I think it’s important for females to support females and to not tear each other
down…
And you know, something that I’ve even found myself thinking more so than
saying is:
you know, when I see a female hanging at the bar with the guys after a conference and things… The first thing that I immediately think is that she’s trying to be one of the boys. When, ok let her be, you know…. I mean who am I to pass any judgement on that. I shouldn’t do that… We have to support each other and make sure that we don’t tear each other down.

Superintendent 4 recognizes women limit their own success when they demonize one another. She recognizes women supporting women is critical in improving educational leadership. She highlights instead how women should encourage and support one another to ensure an improved leadership environment.

While superintendent 4 faces significant challenge in political game-play, sexism and discrimination in her superintendency, she has established a leadership style of integrity and directness to ensure the best outcomes for students. In doing so, she makes meaning of her leadership through a narrative strategy describing her bravery in the face of significant challenge.

**Superintendent 5 – The Eye on the Prize**

Superintendent 5 is a woman who finds strength in her confidence. Having served in a wide variety of school and system leadership positions in many districts, she has a plethora of experience in education. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, she described instances of her experiences portraying how she leverages such confidence to be an effective, impactful superintendent. In the interview, this narrative strategy was employed in two avenues: in how she exemplifies her confidence through her work ethic and approach and how she uses her confidence to combat stereotypes. Together, this confidence allows her to make meaning of her leadership and ensure her district’s focus is maintained on helping students.
I Am Confident in What I Know, I’m Confident in Who I Am.

The superintendent’s narrative strategy is built on confidence. With such, she makes meaning of her leadership and commits to the role despite its challenges. One way in which she leverages this confidence in her leadership is through her work ethic, attention to detail, and ambition.

Superintendent 5 acknowledges that in educational leadership, there are few women; however, she does not allow the underrepresentation of women affect her leadership. Through work ethic and attention to detail, she finds the confidence needed to succeed. When the researcher asked about how her employees view or treat her as a female leader, she explains how she approaches her work with staff:

I think [my employees] know I’m very organized and detailed… and so I don’t know if that’s a female trait, I know it’s my trait.
You know if we have a meeting, we’re gonna have an agenda and we’re gonna have notes to follow up and then when we have the next meeting we’re gonna go back to those notes and follow up from there.
I would say they view me as being very detailed, organized.
They know I’m going to hold them accountable.
And they now know that if I said something in August, I can come right back around to it in October and say, “Now have you done whatever?”
And…my memory is still in tact and I may not have revisited it with you along the way but when the deadline comes, I will.
I don’t know that they treat me any differently but I think they view me as all of those characteristics.

The superintendent’s work ethic and high attention to detail give her the confidence to lead. As she narrates how her employees view her as a female in power, she focuses on her individual characteristics as a leader and avoids “generalizing” such characteristics to being a woman. In fact, she acknowledges this form of confidence allows her to ignore that she is outnumbered by men as a female superintendent and instead focus on the task at hand:

Umm.. you know, I would say…
just being a female leader in itself…
it’s odd that you have all these female teachers and then as you move up the ladder then this is where you start seeing the males.

(Laughs.)
So that’s kind of different….

(Laughs.)
You know….I don’t know if anybody’s said that out loud but it’s kind of….you know…where did the men come from?
You know, ‘cause if you went into an elementary school right now, if we were in session, you’re gonna see all women, female teachers…
Even in a middle school! Even in a high school!
But then, when you get to the top, you see lots of people...
Suddenly you encounter all these men.
And so I guess….You just…
I have become immune to it.
I survey the room and I am confident in what I know, I’m confident in who I am and the information that I have with my team having informed me…
so just I move on and do the best that I can with what I have and share my thoughts and my information.
And I move on from there.

The superintendent acknowledges the pipeline to the superintendency is saturated with women yet power is delegated to men. To deal with that injustice, she ensures she has the best information and strong people working with her. In turn, this confidence has allowed her to become “immune” to working in an environment in which she is outnumbered. This immunity likewise keeps her safe, allowing her to “move on” between responsibilities.

Another form of confidence in which superintendent 5 makes meaning of her leadership is through ambition. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, the superintendent highlighted the ways she was coached to be confident through a desire to seek the next milestone in her career and, ultimately, the superintendency. When the researcher asked the superintendent about the mentors she has had, the superintendent described two women and two men she identified as helping her succeed. In the discussion of her mentors, she explained how various leaders encouraged her:
You know, sometimes people see things in you that you don’t see in yourself readily….
or you know that’s in yourself and you just end up with the right people at the right time.
Um, when I came to [specific county] I had a great assistant principal who I ended up serving as her assistant principal when she got a principalship…[we have] always remained in close contact.
And I would say my former superintendents in [two specific counties], I have maintained strong contacts with them…
so those are the people that say to you when you’re callin’ [and you say] “Well, you know this is going on in my job,”
And then they’re like, “Oh, great.”
They want to hear about it.
And they ask, “So what are you going to do in the future? What are your next aspirations?”
Those are people who keep you on your toes about what you want to do next…

While all four of the mentors encouraged her, she noted a distinction between the women mentors and the male mentors. Interestingly, later in the interview the superintendent explained the two women mentors she had never discussed the possibility of superintendency with her; yet, the two male mentors frequently discussed her eventual move to the superintendency. She explained this dichotomy:

So I don’t know that we as women talk about [the superintendency] when we’re aspiring to that.
So, like, the two men that I talked to, we definitely talked about it, but I think the two women, I don’t think we talked about it as much as I did with those two men.
I just don’t know that…
and maybe because the women aren’t superintendents, but those two men…
they were and I don’t know…
it’s kind of like when I first met them, they were like, always on me about doing something.
Not that the two women weren’t but theirs were more focused on leadership in a district.
Like the men were all about:
“You can go work anywhere.”
I was only gonna work in [specific county], I just thought that’s where I started, that’s where I’ll end.
I would have never thought that I would have left [the specific county.]
If someone would have told me that during my first year teaching, I would have said, “uhh unnn.” My thought was that I wanted to be the assistant superintendent of personnel there and after that I would have been happy. My [male] superintendent at every meeting would be like, “When you get your own district, when you get your own district.” And I was like, I just want to be right here. And so then [he would talk] about, “What if you’re not here in [specific county]?” And I was like, “What do you mean if I’m not here? Is my contract over?” And he would say, “That’s not what that means.”

Early on in her career, the superintendent had no expectation or aspiration to become a superintendent of a district. She states she would have been “happy” in a senior leadership position within her original district. Because she had male mentors who fostered her ambition, she developed the confidence to move into the superintendency. As the literature on gender issues notes, women are taught that to be ambitious is to be unfeminine (Skrla, 2003, p.255-257). Here, we see how the superintendent’s narrative strategy of confidence built from ambition is a direct result of mentorship from male leaders. Through hard work, an attention to detail, and ambition, superintendent 5 uses confidence to approach her work as a female superintendent.

**It Just Is What It Is. I’m Immune to It.**

Superintendent 5 not only uses her strong work ethic and attention to detail to be confident in her work, she also uses confidence to deal with the discrimination she faces as an African American woman. Such confidence is then leveraged to ensure a strict focus on her work. In narrating her leadership story, superintendent 5 told stories about her interactions with others and their stereotypic expectations of her as a Black female. By telling these stories, she illustrated how she uses confidence to combat such stereotypes to do what is right for the students in her school district.
The superintendent readily acknowledges she is outnumbered in the superintendency due to her gender. While she understands the gender gap exists, she does not let it make her uncomfortable in her role. Rather, she leverages the security of her knowledge and work ethic to bring her confidence in who she is as a leader. By doing this, she confronts the gender gap and is comfortable in situations, even when she is the only female. One way she showed this confidence in her interactions with others was in her description of her relationships with her male colleagues:

You know we just had our leadership retreat last week and you know looking around the room, at first, I was sitting there with a female superintendent and we were like, “Where is everybody at?” And we knew what that meant, like where are all the females and then they did come into the room. And you know…we notice that we’re outnumbered. But you know… [Even though I haven’t been a superintendent very long] it seems like I’ve been around them forever. I don’t feel uneasy. But then again it could be because I have known a lot of them because I’ve worked in a few districts, took some graduate courses with some of them, umm… that feels natural. That part does. And even the new people that I meet. And so, I do like to meet people. I may sit at a table where I don’t know anybody and I just want to talk…but they do, too! So we are a unique group of 115 people and we are all together because we all act like we’ve known each other forever and it’s probably because regardless of the size of our district we’re all experiencing the same things.

The superintendent describes her comfort with the majority male superintendents. She understands she is outnumbered in the room yet she does not feel inadequate or “uneasy.” Conversely, the superintendent goes out of her way to sit with people she does not know so she can meet them. In this arena and in her interactions with others, she does not allow being different affect her confidence. It highlights how she makes meaning of her leadership by using such confidence to build relationships with others, regardless of how they may be different.
Another way superintendent 5 uses confidence to counter gender stereotypes is maintaining composure to focus on the task at hand. Specifically, she explains how, as a female, she believes it is critical to ensure her emotions are not made public. She described her position on women crying while on the job:

You know…a person shared with me an article about females, specifically white females, who cry when they don’t get what they want. And so we had a conversation about that and so…umm… that kind of opened up a lot of thoughts and ideas about women and what men perceive of women and what women perceive…. and we had a good, rich conversation about that… For me, I would never cry about something at work, about work. I just would never do that. That emotion has to be held. Before I do that I would get in my vehicle and handle that emotion and come back in. If I were a teacher, I would save it ‘til the end of the day, shut my door, and collect my thoughts again. In any of my situations that’s just not what you let a man or a woman see you do at work because… I don’t want to say that’s a sign of weakness but that’s just a sign of… you’re not thinking about what you’re supposed to be thinking about what you’re doing for the day. And it’s not about you, you’re in an educational setting and it’s about the kids. And so I don’t cry for what I want to a man or to a woman. If I think I want something for myself, I advocate. I get my data to prove it. If that person gives me the job, if that person gives me the opportunity, that’s great. And if they don’t, that’s okay; I’m not the fit at that time. That’s how I look at it. Some people don’t look at it that way. Some people look at it like, they may have to go and appeal their case in a different way but that’s just not who I am, that’s just not how I’m built, and I’m just not going to do it that way.

In this illustration, the superintendent articulates that crying on the job is a stereotypic way women, and specifically white women, deal with stress. While she is hesitant to label crying on the job as a “sign of weakness,” she makes it clear that showing emotion is not ever an option for her. To her, such crying demonstrates a lack of focus, clarity. Instead, she uses her confidence to
gather her “data” and “advocate.” If she is unable to achieve the goal, she does not manipulate
the situation; rather, she acknowledges the failure and moves on. Here the superintendent uses
confidence to combat the stereotypic female response of emotion to make meaning of her
leadership approach.

One of the difficulties women leaders face is the societal expectations of marriage and
motherhood, and superintendent 5 is not immune to those expectations (Sharp, Malone, Walter &
Supley, 2004, pp.23-25). As a women, she has been subject to questions about her marital status
and motherhood. She narrated a story about being questioned about these subjects by a
community member in the middle of a large public meeting:

I’m very comfortable with myself…
I don’t let people guide me on what I should do or be because that is not how I
was reared.
And so I think what I like, I like who I like, I’m very happy.
I’m not unhappy that I’m not married that’s not something I’ve ever pursued.
And it may happen someday…who knows?
The child thing is not going to happen but that’s okay.
And I was encountered with that question…
and one of the parents asked me something about that.
And I simply said to him,
“Well, you know, the person I’m dating, he’s there, I’m here.
So, if it works, it works, if it doesn’t, it doesn’t.
But I’m going to go on and pursue what I want to do because this is where I am at
this time in my life.”
So, he just kind of looked at me, and it was in a big parent meeting, and he just
kind of looked like,
“I can’t believe she just said that.”
And then I went on to say,
“And as for the child thing, no I don’t have any and I don’t expect to have any.”
And at that time I was [specific number of years old], so I’m very open about it
but that doesn’t bother me.
Because I don’t let people dictate that no more than would I dictate a person you
know,
“Well you should be married and only one time then.”
(Laughs.)
So you know, you are who you are and that’s just how I see it and I don’t judge
people for that.
And if they judge me for that, then, that’s up to them.

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And I’m happy and I’m comfortable and life is good for me.

It is interesting to consider the counternarrative of this illustration. How often are men superintendents engaged in large, public meetings in which they are questioned about their marital status? Superintendent 5, as a woman, anticipated such questioning and was prepared to answer it, as evidenced by her willingness to additionally address “the child thing.” To respond to this stereotypic societal expectation of women, she exudes confidence by taking the question directly and without hesitation. Additionally, she does not allow the community’s expectations of her as a woman to affect her ability to lead or to affect her happiness.

The ultimate way superintendent 5 uses confidence to combat stereotypic expectations of her female leadership is through her acknowledgement of being othered. She explains as an African American woman in leadership, she has become accustomed to being the only women, or only African American, or only African American woman in any given situation. Because of this, she has developed the confidence needed in her role as superintendent:

I just know you have to be very clear in what you want, you have to be very organized, you have to have done the research. ‘Cause the way I see it, it doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman… they’re going to challenge you.

Because people want to know that you have done your job to keep your job. And sometimes they want to prove their point.

And I just try to keep my focus on the students.
The eye on the prize is the children.

It’s a political job. I just don’t get caught up in…”Does he think this about me?”

I’m around it all the time…

I walk into the room and I’m going to be the only female or the only African-American or the only African-American female.

It just is what it is. I’m immune to it.

I’m like, who is going to be in the room today?

‘Cause I have to adjust myself anyway for any situation.

I just maintain my information, I know what I want, I know what I believe.

The superintendent has become so used to being othered in leadership that she not only anticipates it, she has become “immune” to it. Because she is an African American woman, she
states she has to “adjust” herself for the situation. Accordingly, she ensures she has all the information she needs and keeps her eye on the prize. In keeping this confidence, she not only combats being othered, she works to ensure her focus is maintained on benefiting students.

Superintendent 5 uses a narrative strategy of confidence to make meaning of her leadership. Her confidence is evidenced specifically in her work ethic, approach, and how she combats stereotypes. In leveraging her narrative strategy of confidence, superintendent 5 works to ensure the best outcomes for students in her school district.

**Superintendent 6 – I Leverage My Humanity a Whole Lot**

Superintendent 6 brings a wide variety of experience in the educational field to the superintendency and understands how gender affects her leadership and others’ perceptions of her ability. While she acknowledges the dynamics of gender issues in her work, she strives to be evaluated in her leadership as a superintendent, not as a female superintendent. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, she emphasized a desire to strip away consideration of gender and focus instead on the human element. In doing so, she works to ensure she and other leaders are valued on their contributions to the profession and not on their gender. This narrative strategy of focusing on the human element was evidenced both in the ways she described her approach to leadership and similarly in the ways she explained away issues with gender dynamics through positivity.

**You’re Tougher Than Any Man Would Have Been.**

One way in which superintendent 6 articulated her narrative strategy of focusing on the human element is understood through her approach to leadership. The superintendent, the first in her family to go to college, has extensive work experience that illustrates her strong work ethic and commitment to students. While she did not desire to be a superintendent early on in her
career, her success in various roles in the educational realm proved the superintendency was an achievable next step. Because of her varied work experience, she describes her approach in the role of superintendent as one that combines both stereotypic male and female qualities. In doing so, her goal is to approach her work in a gender-neutral way. When asked about how she makes meaning of being the most powerful employee in the district and a woman, she explained her view of the effective, gender-neutral superintendent:

Well, okay I have thought about this. I’m gonna tell you a story. When I first, when I first arrived, in this district, um, I also served as the [specific central office position.]
So I got, and I have served as [this specific central office position] in two other districts besides this one.
So that’s a job that normally is a negative. [This role has to] deal with problems, issues, personnel concerns, um…reprimands, hiring, dismissal, all those kinds of things.
Luckily when I, when I came that job was also paired with [another specific role in central office.] So I would look at half the job as, well okay I might have to do something that’s unpleasant today.
But at the same time I’m also out in school buildings seeing real work taking place, and the children learning, and the teachers teaching.
So therefore there was a balance.
So how would I describe being, umm…in the seat that makes the decisions and also being a woman?
I see… I see it as the nurturing side, the counseling person if you will. The uh nurturer, but also um, it’s a combination of that.
Which some people associate with being female, I don’t.
I think that, that males and females are both nurturers at different times, when, when they’re called upon to be.

In this narrative, the superintendent describes her approach as a female superintendent, comparing it to the balance between the “unpleasant” aspects of dealing with personnel concerns and the “real work” of being in school buildings and seeing children. While she equates the pleasant parts of the job with the nurturing approach, she is clear to establish that this is not a female trait; rather, it is a human trait that both “males and females” possess. By providing this
justification, she establishes that her view of the nurturing element is not a product of her femininity.

As she establishes her approach to the superintendency acknowledging the need to nurture, she likewise narrates the need to be tough. Again, in this narration, she strips the quality of “toughness” away from being associated to any one specific gender. She explains how she dealt with gender stereotyping after her stance on a significant student discipline issue in her district:

I also um… had… the second part of the story is I had the, um, good challenge. It was not an opportunity but it was a challenge. Of having to during my superintendency, having to deal with, um… bomb threats. Uh, that luckily were no credible threat. The [police] deemed they were not credible. It was pranksters if you will. Uh, and how I dealt with that, was probably uh, systematic and tougher than anyone would have expected. Now I did not put on a female or a male persona at that point. I did not think of it as being uh, I just thought of it as being the superintendent, if you will. Until after it was all over, and I had a community member approach me and say, “You’re tougher than any man would have been.” And I said, “Well I think I take that as a compliment, however, I think what you should say is, ‘You’re a tough superintendent.’” And the person said, “Ah, it’s not gender with you then.” I said, “No, it really has never been much about gender with me.” I said, “I recognize gender plays into any organization and leadership, but…I try very hard to take the gender out of the decisions I make.” Because again I think males should be nurturers and female leaders should be nurturers.

In this illustration, the superintendent has encountered a challenging disciplinary situation. When she follows the law and policies in place, her actions are deemed “tough,” and so tough, in fact, that a community member publicly equates her actions comparable to how he perceives the way a male superintendent would have acted. When superintendent 6 is challenged by the community member, she replies to him acknowledging that his comment was insinuated to be a
“compliment”; in other words, female toughness equivalent to a male is perceived as a strength. Yet, she replies to the community member that toughness should not be associated with either gender, and she explains her toughness is simply an act of being a superintendent and not a product of either male or female likeness. Here, superintendent 6 again establishes her narrative strategy as one that strips away gender. In her leadership approach as a combination of the tough nurturer, she challenges the association of gender to her superintendency and makes meaning of her leadership.

These seemingly opposite qualities of toughness and nurturer are ultimately combined by the superintendent and described as the human element. To superintendent 6, the tough nurturer approach has nothing to do with gender but everything to do with being humane. When questioned by the researcher about her interactions with male politicians and how she uses her gender in these relationships, she once again explains how she attempts to consciously take gender out of these interactions:

[Researcher]: When you, in your role, in your wide range of interactions with different kinds of people…from kids to commissioners to, you name it….do you feel like your behavior changes, or do you feel like ever like you have to behave more feminine or more masculine at times?

[Participant]: No.

[Researcher]: Why do you think that is?

[Participant]: No…I think because I was one of [specific number of] daughters in a family. And my sister and I were treated as daughters, very much the same as I feel my mother and father would have treated a son. So, I don’t think… I was never told that um, I should allow to open a door for me or that I should not. I was never, um, even though I was born and raised in the south. I was never taught that I was to be a southern belle, nor that I was any uh, less capable at any job than any male. So a lot of it has to do with my parents and my upbringing. So, no I don’t think I do.
Now, I will tell you that sometimes a male will hesitate to open a door for me because they don’t know if I’m going to be offended or not. I’m not at all offended. I’m at the age where if a male or a female wants to hold a door open for me… I think that’s kindness, thank you. So, so do I feel I have to be any more feminine or masculine in any arena, no.

[Researcher]: Or do you like leverage that as an asset?

[Participant]: No I leverage my humanity. I leverage my humanity a whole lot. And I leverage um, I’ll give you an example. In front of [a specific group of politicians] I uh, gave very… I was not flowery in my speech, because I was very certain of what [they] wanted. I had built a relationship with them… and I knew that they want the facts. [I knew they were thinking] Give me the bottom line, tell me what your school district needs and why you need it and, and we’ll do the best we can. So I was very um, definite, straight forward, and I was a minimalist with uh, with my narrative, if you will…

In this illustration, superintendent 6 focuses on why she approaches her work defined as a human and not as a female. She recounts how her parents raised her to be neutral towards male gestures of politeness, such as opening the door for a woman. This rearing established her approach towards life and, in turn, her work to consider her interactions with others as people and not by their gender qualities. She additionally explains how in her approach with local politicians she capitalized on her relationships with them to understand the most appropriate speech for achieving her funding goals. By focusing on these relationships as relationships between people and not as relationships between female superintendent and all male politicians, she feels she better understands how to approach their work together and achieve what is best for students in the district.

As a female leader in a male-dominated arena, removing consideration of gender from interactions allows superintendent 6 to make meaning of her leadership. In her descriptions of her approach to leadership as a tough nurturer focused on the human element, she can be valued
and validated for her successes because of her leadership and not because of her femininity.

While the leader acknowledges and understands gender dynamics, a focus on the human element allows her the credibility, respectability of her accomplishments. It establishes her as equal to her male counterparts.

**You’ve Always Got On Rose-Colored Glasses.**

In addition to her approach to leadership, superintendent 6 also explains her narrative strategy of focusing on the human element through her interactions with issues of gender. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, there were several instances in which the superintendent described conflicts she encountered concerning gender. In these conflicts, the superintendent made meaning of her leadership by attempting to remove the perspective of gender and instead focus on the issue with a human element or a gender-neutral approach. Through this process, the superintendent seems to process her leadership as a female superintendent by explaining away gender issues through a focus on positivity.

One manifestation of the superintendent’s process of focusing on the human element through removing gender was made visible in her description of interacting with men and specifically, her male superintendent colleagues. When asked about her relationships with them, superintendent 6 described these interactions as overwhelmingly positive. She explained how her upbringing affords her the ability to get along well with men:

(Laughs) I have always, uh been told, that I am uh…
that, that I fit in with the male population in conversing about business ideas.
My best friend in high school was not a female, he was a male.
And uh, so I don’t, I don’t know how that relates to what I’m getting ready to say to you but I do think that it relates….
Um, my interactions with my male and female colleagues is very similar.
I can pick up the phone and call two male superintendents right now, and brainstorm with them, just the same as I can pick up the phone and dial two female superintendents and brainstorm with them.
For example, if I’m having a problem in, and I don’t have this problem, so I’m gonna use this example. Um, we all know that public schools need to have really good media cooperation, from our, from our newspaper. I have had those tough conversations of how to build really good relationships with my media, here in [specific county] with two male superintendents, and with two female superintendents. The conversations were very similar. So I don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and call my [colleagues], whether they are female or male. And that two and two is accurate. That, that two and two is accurate. Now, are there times where I’ll walk up on a conversation at a conference, and do I ever feel that the conversation tenor or tone might change? Perhaps, at a state’s superintendents meeting perhaps… [but] I feel like we collaborate pretty well as a superintendent group. And I don’t know that gender plays into it for me necessarily.

The order and process in which the superintendent narrates the description of her relationships with male colleagues is important to understanding how she makes meaning of her female leadership. When questioned by the researcher about her interactions with male superintendents, she qualifies her response by explaining that she gets along “better” with the “male population,” as to demonstrate she is qualified or fit enough to have these relationships with men even though she is a woman. In this approach, it is as if she makes herself one of the boys, communicating to the researcher that the men do not need to change for her; rather, she has made herself one of them. After qualifying her response with this opening, she describes that she gets along with her male colleagues just as she does with her female colleagues, and she can get support from them at any time. Although she describes this to be the case, she then begins to close her description of her relationships admitting that when she is at a state superintendents’ meeting—a meeting dominated by men—she acknowledges that her physical approach to the men causes a change in the “tenor or tone” of the conversation. As she verbalizes that she is literally excluded from joining a male superintendent male conversation, she then closes her narration by stating that she is unsure if this is a result of her gender. In its entirety, this narration shows how the
superintendent makes meaning of her leadership by removing gender as an explanation for issues of conflict. By explaining her ability to “fit in” with men when discussing “business ideas,” she attempts to qualify that her gender does not hold her back from a seat at the male-dominated superintendents’ table. When she is intentionally excluded from the male superintendent conversation at state superintendents’ meeting, she dismisses the exclusion as one not based on her gender. By making this conflict gender-neutral, superintendent 6 can focus positively on her leadership approach and make meaning of her role as a woman superintendent.

In addition to her interactions with her male superintendent colleagues, superintendent 6 likewise described her working relationships with male politicians as interactions in which she focuses on her humanity and not on her gender. The superintendent describes these relationships in gender-neutral ways, focusing on the positivity of her human approach to ensure the students of her district benefit. When the researcher asked the superintendent about her interactions with politicians she works with, almost all of whom are men, she narrated her feelings during her first presentation to the commissioners:

[Participant]: Well no one would ignore the fact that I’m female. I mean they won’t ignore that. I hope that it would not give me advantage or disadvantage…

[Researcher]: How so?

[Participant]: In, in dealing with, for example commissioners… I just gave you the commissioners story [about asking for funding.] I hope that they watched me at that podium and thought that this is a person who cares about students, she’s got her facts in order and this is why we need to do this…. 

[Researcher]: I’m curious if you had any of those, um, interactions [with politicians in which you] might have had a more difficult time because…because of your gender? Or a stereotype? 

[Participant]: I probably have had a more difficult time; I don’t know that I could put my finger on an example.
But I tend to try to rise above that, and, and, and like I say I’ve used this plenty of times.
Use the human factor, we’re all human beings you know, let’s do what’s best for these students in this district, or is my school, or in this situation.
Um… let me try to think of a specific time…
Okay so this is a feeling. This is not even a perception of someone else’s perception of me okay?
I had the feeling, and it was internal, and it was probably all self-imposed.
That my first time standing in front of the commissioners, to make a budget request, would tell the tale.
In other words, that I had to, and that was pressure that I put on myself. That I had to pass the test, so to speak.
Now, I think that was self-imposed.
I don’t know that anybody had whispered in my ear, or that I had heard any rumbling of let’s see if she can do the job.
That, that I had, this is all self-imposed in feelings.
So, I think that, I put the pressure on myself, to be sure that I read my audience well…
And knew exactly what format they wanted…
and so maybe I over prepared, okay?
So that could have something to do with gender.
That I over prepared to be sure to get what I needed desperately for these students.
So, again I don’t know where that feeling came from.
Except that I was umm, I’m just adamant about doing what’s right for the students of [this] county.
So, part of it was self-imposed pressure, but I have to tell you, that when I stood in front of the podium I did not feel that I would receive any less consideration, than what my predecessor received as a male superintendent.
I didn’t stand there and think, oh they’re not going to give me as much money as the former superintendent. I didn’t have those feelings.
I just put this self-imposed, I’ve got to do this really well.
I’ve got to not take up too much time,
I’ve got to gauge my responses, and be sure I’m answering their question, those kind of things.

In describing the first presentation she had to the commissioners, she begins the story to the researcher by acknowledging that, of course, they know she is a woman; yet, she “hope[s]” this neither gives her an advantage or disadvantage in her presentation. This establishes the story as one again approached with a gender-neutral lens. She affirms this stripping away of her gender when she states her gender has likely made her interactions with politicians “more difficult” yet she focuses on the “human factor” of her presentation. When probed by the researcher to try to
recognize how her gender may have come into play during the interaction, she recognizes she felt as if the commissioners were putting her to a “test” and, accordingly, she ensured she “over-prepared.” Though she articulates this first presentation to the commissioners as a test, she deflects pressure from them as one that is “self-imposed” and not a result of their view of her as a female leader. Notably, her narration of this self-imposition is emphasized heavily; she repeats the work “self-imposed” five times in just 18 sentences of her story. Her insistence on the test or pressure from the male politicians being a result of her own creation communicates a desire to deflect away from a consideration of gender dynamics at work. Accordingly, the superintendent makes meaning of her leadership as one that is gender-neutral and allows her access to the male-dominated table.

In addition to her interactions with male colleagues and politicians, the superintendent’s description of her encounter with sexism shows her narrative strategy of neutralizing gender by focusing on the human element. The superintendent was quick to respond “yes” when asked if she had ever experienced sexism in her career. When asked for an example of such sexism, the superintendent provided a story about an interaction she had early on in her teaching career:

As a teacher. As a teacher in a classroom.
I can remember a group of male teachers, standing in a teacher’s lounge.
Now I had to go way back for this one.
Um, probably cause’ everyone knows I live in a personnel world, so maybe they watch what they say in front of me.
(Laughs.)
Maybe that’s what it is.
I can remember walking in on a very inappropriate joke being told.
Now, is that um, sexist? Absolutely.
Uh, how did I handle it?
I put my hands on my teacher hips and I said, “Gentlemen, that is inappropriate, and your mothers would be ashamed.”
Faces turned red, apologies ensued, and I didn’t hear any more jokes in the teacher’s lounge.
So, if I feel I need to address something, I try hard not to embarrass people.
I...one of the things that I’ve always shared with principals or colleagues, or whomever I’m working with is that, you know, the, the goal of any conversation is to ensure that everybody’s dignity is left intact.
So, you know, while as a young teacher with my hands on my hips, I might not have left those gentlemen’s dignity intact...
I was not rude.
I just said their, their mama wouldn’t…what would their mama think of what they had just, the joke they had just told. You know.

The depiction of superintendent 6 in her story of responding to the sexist joke in the teacher’s lounge describes her narrative approach as a female superintendent in a male-dominated arena.
In this narration, the superintendent responded and likewise describes herself as a mother to the men who made the inappropriate joke in her presence. By doing so, she redirects their sexist behavior by shaming them as little boys who should not upset their mother. Her response to them removes her as their colleague and places them in a different position, allowing her playful response to dismiss the offensiveness to her as a female colleague and instead focus on the damage such a joke may have on their own reputations with their mother figure. While she acknowledges the inappropriateness of their joke, her response does not acknowledge how such sexism affects her positionality and power in the workplace setting.

The anecdote about her response to the sexist joke by her male colleagues and its relation to her narrative strategy is further explained by the superintendent’s description of how she deals with sexism in her current work. She explains how such issues affect her as a female superintendent:

[Participant]: All throughout career, life, or whatever...
I think you run into people that, that perhaps are sexist in some way.
But I can’t change their behavior.
I can only...
I can only control my response to their behavior.
So, my response to their behavior is to be very open and communicate: “Um, that’s offensive.”
Or, “I wish you hadn’t said that...have you thought about how that sounded?”
[Researcher]: Hmm…so where do you think [the ability to have a] brave response comes from?

[Participant]: Wow… hmm.
From a father and mother, who did not attend college themselves, but were business owners.
Who basically said, you know, you must advocate for yourself, stand up for yourself.
You don’t have to do it in an ugly way.
And you know, female leaders often times worry about being labeled the “B” word….
So, where did that gumption come from?
Ummm…it came from parents saying advocate for yourself, everyone’s equal, everyone’s good.
Find the good in people, but don’t let someone walk over the top of you to, to the point, that, that then you, you think that oh I wish I had.
So I try hard not to have regrets….
And, uh, folks tease me and say,
“Oh you’ve always got on rose-colored glasses, your glass is always more than half full.”
Maybe. Maybe so.

Superintendent 6 strives to approach gender issues with a focus on humanity. While others “tease” her for her positivity, she works to ensure her response to people, even to issues of sexism, is delicate. She is cognizant that women must be mindful of their approach so as to not be labeled a “bitch.” She combats this stereotype by seeing the “good in people,” respecting others while still acknowledging the problem. Likewise, this is how the superintendent makes meaning of her female leadership in a male-dominated profession. In her interactions with male superintendent colleagues, with male politicians, and with issues of sexism, she focuses on how she can leverage her humanity by neutralizing the gender in these circumstances. Through this strategy, she keeps positivity and works to ensure the best outcomes for her students.

**Superintendent 7 – I Really Try to be Who I Am All The Time**

While Superintendent 7 had spent years in varying educational leadership roles, her ascension into the superintendency was unexpected. Though she explained that she was not a
leader “desperate for” a superintendency because of her family obligations, she happily accepted the challenge to lead a school district. In her narration of her leadership story, superintendent 7 highlighted her authenticity throughout her experiences. With an emphasis on measured confidence, relationship building, and servant leadership, the superintendent leverages her authenticity to make meaning of her female leadership.

I Don’t Want to be Inauthentic.

One of the ways in which superintendent 7 demonstrates her narrative strategy of authenticity in her female leadership is through a sense of calculated confidence. While she is cognizant that, as a woman, she must be thoughtful in her approach due to the possibility of being stereotyped, she likewise is comfortable in who she is as a leader. This measured poise was established early in the interview as the superintendent explained when she has been happiest in her career:

Um… I loved being a principal. I like, to me…
The most important part of my job, the times that I’ve been happiest professionally, are…have been when I had a certain amount of autonomy, and been able to…
And that doesn’t mean working in a vacuum, you have to work with other people. I’ve never minded being the bottom line person.
Um… so probably the happiest I’ve been professionally was as a principal and in this role.

Here, the superintendent describes the two pinnacles of her career have been when she has had the most authority in her organization, both at the school level as a principal and at the district level as a superintendent. This illustrates her comfort with her own authority and leadership. She describes having this level of autonomy as pleasing, not stressful or intimidating. It establishes her confidence and authenticity in the role of superintendent and shows how she makes meaning of her leadership.
This authenticity through confidence is seen also in how superintendent 7 considers gender in her approach. Specifically, she considers how others’ perceptions of her as a woman affect how they receive her. Accordingly, she works to communicate in particular ways that combine her confidence with approachability. She explains this delicate balance:

[Participant]: I think that that’s sometimes that’s not the, not always the case. I… I’ve not… I can’t say that I’ve dealt with um… a lot of push back with me in leadership… But I’m, I’m a pretty assertive, confident person. I think probably, there’s more… I think men are given…given more deference when they’re tough than women are. I think women, you know words are used to describe women who have, uh… who are direct. And so I think sometimes I have to overcompensate with, for that by being um… warm and approachable but also firm… and just trying to strike that balance… And I don’t think, I think men are given more um… girth in terms of that so I think that’s probably the biggest.

[Researcher]: So, do you, do you um… do you feel like you ever have to behave a certain way when you’re dealing with certain people? I imagine in your role you deal with you know, you can deal with a child one day and then maybe two hours later you’re dealing with a politician, so um… do you, because of your gender do you ever feel like you behave differently?

[Participant]: … I don’t think so. I think that I um… At this point in my life I mean I am who I am. I mean you adapt a little bit… you know… to you know to… I certainly have a different conversation with a, with a student then I do with an… you know, an adult who has done something inappropriate on the job. But… um… I… I can’t say that I have, that I shift my approach dramatically. I mean… I think… you know when you’re a good teacher you figure out what students need, and you know what you want to accomplish and so you figure out how to navigate that. I think you do the same with adults, um… but I really try to be who I am all the time. I don’t think, you know open doors, closed doors…um… I try to be the same person all the time and um… I’ve always been very aware of how, what I say and how I communicate, whether it’s as a group or one on one because I don’t want anyone um… to perceive that… to me modeling what you expect is really important. And I don’t want anyone to ever believe that I um… I’m behaving one way in one situation…
I don’t want to be inauthentic I guess, is… is…what I would say.

The superintendent acknowledges that she is extremely confident in who she is as a person, leader. Because she is a woman, she understands she must use this confidence in a way that is warm and approachable. If she does not, she knows it will result in being labeled. Even though she understands the rules of confidence are not the same or fair between men and women leaders, she does not allow such inequity to affect who she is as a leader. Instead, she works to maintain integrity in her communication, ensuring she models the type of work she expects from her staff. In doing so, she leverages her confidence to ensure she is authentic in all she does as a leader.

Another way superintendent 7 described her authenticity through her confidence was through her honesty. She explained how being straight forward has allowed her to be successful in her role as an educational leader and a superintendent. She illustrated this confidence in a description of a recent interaction with one of the principals she supervises:

So, um… my approach with principals…
I had a new principal in my office this morning, and you know.
I was very honest with [the principal.]
[I told the principal that he/she needed to work on specific skills] and here are some suggestions, you know, here…
[I told the principal,] “You’re a new principal…I want you to do a message to parents um… and to families, and work with our public relations manager on that, and get out there.
I want you to, there are a couple of [problems that have been caused by you that] you need to fix.
You need to figure out how you are going to get [your staff] on board with you as a leader.”
So, I’m very honest with people um…
and I’ve found that the assumption is that people operate that way but that isn’t. People generally avoid difficult conversations.

While the conversation may be uncomfortable, the superintendent provides direct, specific feedback to the principal based on what the superintendent believes needs to be improved. In her
narration of this anecdote, the superintendent acknowledges that, while it is assumed that most supervisors provide this level of honest feedback to the staff, it is more common for supervisors to avoid the difficult conversations that need to be conducted. Superintendent 7, however, demonstrates confidence in her approach with her principals, ensuring she is honest and direct. In doing this, the superintendent makes meaning of her leadership through her authenticity. This authenticity is illustrated in her comfort with autonomy, her calculated communication, and her honesty with others.

**I Sort of Planted the Seeds Early On.**

Superintendent 7’s narrative strategy of authenticity is also demonstrated through her relationships. In her work with staff, the board of education, politicians, and her own children, she works intentionally to create bonds build on trust and mutual respect. To her, ensuring these relationships are healthy is critical to her ability to lead. Accordingly, the superintendent makes meaning of her female leadership through authenticity in her relationships with others.

One important relationship the superintendent has worked to establish is with her staff. Although she is the boss, she approaches her staff members with a willingness and goal to work alongside those she employs. To illustrate how she builds these relationships, the superintendent explained how she navigated a tumultuous time in the district prior to her appointment as superintendent:

When you are working at a district level, especially, you know, when I came in at the district level [here] as a [specific role,] you’re having to negotiate a lot more. And you’re working with people… um… who might have differing ideas on things or priorities… and you’re figuring out how to navigate those within the positional authority to make certain things happen that you know need to happen…. You definitely have the ability to do more of what needs to be done in [the superintendent] role…. [When] I came in[to this district]… I told you we had uh… a superintendent for a [short period of time.]
It was very volatile.
I came in from um… [specific place to] here as an outsider.
I felt sort of like I was the protector and I tried to keep everything running and
everybody on track.
And… and so I developed some relationships…
and I’d say a level of respect then….
so I’ve never been challenged for decisions even before I was superintendent here
at… at a significant level….
I think working at the district level, in a lower level position…
I just tried to figure out who I was, and how I fit within that organization.

Even though she entered the district as an “outsider” during a difficult time in leadership, the
superintendent recognized the importance of establishing relationships with the staff throughout
the system. Identifying this period of leadership was chaotic for employees, she adapted her
work to serve as a “protector” to them. In doing so, she helped ensure the system ran smoothly
and everyone remained on track. This ability to identify how she needed to nurture these
relationships with staff given the circumstances, even though she was new to the district, allowed
her to establish her leadership. This authenticity then benefited her when she became the
district’s superintendent. Her staff know and trust her and, accordingly, do not significantly
“challenge” the decisions she makes.

Superintendent 7 maintains the same focus on authentic relationships with the district’s
board of education and local politicians. In working with these stakeholders, she works to ensure
there is honest and open communication. She spends significant time with politicians to ensure
they understand the district’s needs and are supportive of her and the district’s work.

Superintendent 7 illustrated her intentionality in building these authentic relationships by
narrating a recent request for additional school funding:

I mean to me the biggest um… determining factor in success and leadership is
being able to build relationships with people…
and navigate those.
And like I said you sort of figure out what makes somebody tick.
And you kind of figure out what you need to accomplish…
And how you need to… you know I may have to approach… go at it from one angle with one person and a different angle, you know… with a different person. I’ve had a really good… You know I had lunch with [a specific politician] this week. I had um… I’ve met individually with…[specific politicians] right out of the gate. I have really tried to have one-on-one with people. And I think that makes a big difference. A lot of listening, trying to get to know them… “Tell me about your family. Tell me about your priorities.” That’s kind of how I approach [politicians.] “Let me know a little more about yourself and where you’re coming from, and what you think is important for our… our community.” I’ve tried to be involved in the community, um… You know I’ve gotten on several boards, leadership boards in the community so I can connect with kind of the key players…in the community. And so far that’s gone really well. [Recently] the commissioners approved our budget… fully funded us. And it was a [significant specific] dollar increase… But I just really approached it as individual conversations, pure… I sort of planted the seeds early on of… “Here are some of our priorities… You know, teacher recruitment, retention. We have some things that we need to do to address our, some pay issues with our classified employees, we have some facility’s needs.” And I started having those conversations without putting dollar figures on them. Then I, um… I dug in a little bit more specifically with dollar figures. And when, I worked very closely with [specific politician] to kind of say, “This is what we’re thinking.” I didn’t want… I don’t like surprises. And I don’t want anybody to come, and this is true with the Board, too… I do not want the Board to be surprised by, I don’t want them to find anything out in a public setting that I think is going to create waves. So, um… I’ve had individual conversations with [specific politicians] when there is something that I think they need to be aware of, that I’m bringing to the table. And I have… if there is something that I think is particularly touchy, or important to a particular [politician.] I work with them on that. I work very closely with [them.] I just think it is a lot of one-on-one listening and relationship building.

In describing the importance of authentic relationships with the board and local politicians, the superintendent illustrates this action as planting seeds in the community. Just as a gardener does to ensure the plant grows, the superintendent spends significant time and energy to not simply
plant the seed but to nurture it. She spends individual, one-on-one time with each of the politicians, even when there is significant demand on her time with her daily job responsibilities. Not only does she provide this individualized time, she likewise conveys her care for each of them as people, asking about their families, their priorities for the good of the community. The superintendent emphasizes the importance of clear, honest, direct communication to ensure there are “no surprises” with the politicians, as she recognizes such surprises would compromise her integrity as the district’s leader. Likewise, she is intentional in how she proceeds in prioritizing her district’s needs, planting the seeds of information before making any specific request for funding. As she explains, this nurturing of the political garden literally paid off: her district received a significant increase in local fiscal resources. Maintaining authenticity in the relationships she has with her board and local politicians allows her to make meaning of her leadership in the district.

The most important relationship superintendent 7 has established in her work as a female superintendent is the relationship she has with her children. As a female leader who works tremendous hours each week, the superintendent understands how critical it is to nurture this relationship and ensure it is one established on honest communication and love. She discussed this critical relationship when the researcher asked about her relationship between motherhood and the superintendency:

Yeah…so I…it’s a balance. It’s a balancing act, and sometimes I’m better at it than others. Um, I love work, and they know that. I love what I do. The um… I really tried to um, you know I’ve said I like to model what I expect. I think my kids, I’ve always tried to convey that I’m not perfect… But…I think it’s important for you to know that women can um… can be moms and also have a career. And…I feel like my kids are well adjusted, they’re…you know, they’re confident. I think that they…they are intelligent, confident, thoughtful.
And I so… I don’t know how that balance has worked out except that I think that so far, they have turned out to be pretty well adjusted. They will say… I think they have a lot of respect for what I do. I think…I don’t think they have any doubt, that um… you know, that I’m there for them, and we are very open and honest with each other. But it’s a… it’s a juggling act… I think it’s worked out. I mean I don’t have regrets. I have… um, tried to strike that balance. I think they respect what I do. They’ve never, I’ve never had a comment from them of you know, you haven’t been there, or you haven’t done or resentment. I mean any comments they’ve ever made about work have been positive for me.

Superintendent 7 establishes in this narrative the importance of both her work and her motherhood to her identity as a woman. To ensure the authenticity of her work in both arenas, she has worked to establish an intentional relationship with her children that is built on honesty, care, and humility. Through this intentionality, the superintendent strikes a healthy balance between her work as a mother and her work as a superintendent. Likewise, this relationship benefits her children, who have grown proud of their mother’s work in both arenas and who value what she does both as their mother and as a superintendent. This authenticity in the “juggling act” between her relationship as mother and superintendent has allowed the superintendent to “strike a balance” and not have any regrets for her work in either place. With her staff, board, politicians, and—most importantly—her children, the superintendent leverages authenticity in her relationships to make meaning of her leadership as a female superintendent.

I Don’t Put Myself on a Pedestal.

In addition to demonstrating her narrative strategy of authenticity through confidence and relationship building, superintendent 7 likewise employs a strong work ethic that communicates her expectations. The superintendent values servant leadership and works alongside her staff, setting her expectations by modeling what she desires of her employees. Additionally, when she
considers gender dynamics, she is cognizant of how expectations of women in leadership demands a high level of strong work ethic, with women having to prove themselves to gain access to the superintendency. In executing servant leadership, superintendent 7 communicates her narrative strategy of authenticity by demonstrating the highest level and quality of work.

The superintendent’s leadership style is one way in which she demonstrates her authenticity. To her, leaders must be willing to engage in the work they expect their employees to do. She illustrated this approach by explaining one of her priorities for the upcoming school year:

So I feel like I have a good rapport with [the principals].
I think that it’s a little easier because I have been working with them directly, and so they know that I work hard.
I’m… to me I’m a big proponent of servant leadership.
I feel like you just roll…
I mean I don’t put myself on a pedestal.
You roll your sleeves up, you do the work.
So, um… when principals, I’ve identified some kind of priority schools.
And I’m asking that [the] Curriculum [department] work directly with principals and their teacher teams on student achievement, curriculum alignment, those areas.
But I’m going to be working with those principals to say…
“Ok, you know, let’s… it’s your goal setting conference: let’s talk about your teachers that you have concerns with…and we’re going to have those conversations throughout the year about how you’re supporting them to be successful.”
Um, and then I’m also meeting with principals.
I’ve blocked off time to visit each school during the first month.
And I want to get in [the] classrooms.
I’m going to go in every classroom.
I want to talk about those teachers [with the principals]…
and I want to talk about how [they’re] leveraging [the] best teachers to improve the school.
And then I want us to be talking about how [they’re] addressing those concerns with teachers.
So, that’s to me the most important part of this, what I’m doing.
And then just being very accessible.
Because servant leadership defines her leadership approach, superintendent 7 believes in “rolling up her sleeves” and working alongside her principals. In doing so, she has established good working relationships with them, as they recognize her willingness and desire to work with them, not above them. Her explanation of the “most important” work she has as a superintendent is to be active in schools: to visit classrooms and to discuss teaching and learning with principals.

With so much demand on the superintendent’s time due to a variety of priorities in her work, it would be easy for the superintendent to remain detached from school operations. Recognizing teaching and learning is the heart of the school system, she prioritizes this work and commits to being part of it. By doing so, she demonstrates a care and authenticity to the system’s mission.

In addition to her approach as servant leadership, superintendent 7 demonstrates authenticity by setting and modeling clear expectations for work. She believes that by communicating these expectations, employees and students benefit. The superintendent does not shy away from the challenges of modeling a strong work ethic for her staff; rather, she engages closely with others in this process. She illustrated this work in how she evaluates the principals in her district:

One thing that I did um…
I think that the evaluation process [prior to my superintendency] looked…
I wasn’t involved in their evaluations when I was [in a different roll in the district.]
I think that there was a more laid-back process and I think it’s really important, like I said, to model what you expect.
So when I did principal evaluations I looked at their Teacher Working Conditions surveys, I looked at their data, I kind of triangulated what I had seen with [Human Resources], and Curriculum and other departments who work with principals and I gave really honest feedback.
And for some of them, we had…
All the principals did not get distinguished and accomplished on evaluations and I made really sure in my conversations with them to say:
“Here’s where I see you, here’s why I see you at this level, lets discuss that.”
And I think they respected that.
And I’ve told them,
“My expectation is that you do this with your teachers. I think it’s really important that you provide support, and I’m going to provide you with support but that I’m honest because we can’t grow if we just, we don’t look at the things that we’re good at and the things we can improve on.”

So my expectation to principals, and I’ve already discussed this a couple of weeks back we had a leadership planning day…

And I said,

“You know, we have a high teacher turnover rate. You need to dig into the Teacher Working Conditions survey results with your staff. They need to see that you are being very intentional by hearing what their concerns are, and responding to those.”

[I’ve told them:] “You need to hire the best people you can hire, and you need to be in their classrooms providing support and honest feedback…”

And that’s my expectation.

For the superintendent, there is no alternative to specifically and directly articulating what she expects principals should do. This clarity is not to micromanage her staff but rather to focus on growth for the principals and the district. By conducting principal evaluations using data, she models exactly what she expects principals to do with their teachers. Because of her modeling, her actions do not cause resentment with her staff; it breeds respect. Through a centering on growing together, the superintendent’s setting and modeling of clear expectations for work ethic provide the tools principals need to improve their schools. This authenticity to establishing norms for behavior allows the superintendent to make meaning of her leadership style.

As superintendent 7 makes meaning of her leadership through authenticity in her strong work ethic, the superintendent understands how gender dynamics in the superintendency affect her perception of varying levels of dedication. When considering the female and men superintendents she knows, she explains her perceptions of their abilities:

[Participant]: There are some strong female superintendents in the mix….

But they’re all, I mean you can tell, I mean the [women] who are in those roles don’t play around.

I mean these are people who are pretty confident …um, pretty assertive…

You know, just it definitely…

This is bad to say, the men…

There are a lot of men in the group…
Some of them are really strong and then there are others that it’s just like you know….you’re not sure exactly how they landed there. The female superintendents, I don’t think that’s the case. Every female superintendent I’ve met I’ve felt like… You know she’s pretty, she’s bringing her A game! Like I don’t know that you’re going to slide into a superintendent position as a female… I don’t…I don’t think that the odds are strong that that’s going to happen. I can’t…I don’t know if I can say that for men, the male superintendents.

[Researcher]: Hmm… why do you think that is?

[Participant]: Um… I don’t know. I mean I don’t know if some of it is kind of a carryover…you know, that mindset of men are…you know, “We have this man who’s been a good coach and he’s been a principal in the district and he’s you know, wears a nice suit…” (Laughter.) You know what I mean? And “He’s going to look nice in a board meeting,” and um, I…you know, “We can play golf with him and…” I don’t know. I think there’s a certain amount of that.

In considering gender dynamics, superintendent 7 articulates how female superintendents do not have an option other than to be confident, strong, and hard working. As she explains, because achieving the superintendency is so unlikely for women, women must commit daily to outperforming their competition. She describes each of the female superintendents she knows, including herself, as always bringing their “A game,” their best performance. Conversely, she admits that while she knows many high performing male superintendents, she recognizes there are other male superintendents who seem to “slide” into the superintendency without having demonstrated the same level of work ethic required of women. Unlike women, she describes men as benefiting from their ability to engage in stereotypic male activities, such as coaching, golfing, and wearing a suit. This expectation for women to work harder, stronger affects how superintendent 7 commits to her daily work. Through her narrative strategy of authenticity in her confidence, relationships, and work ethic, the superintendent makes meaning of her leadership.
Superintendent 8 – I Had to Put on My Big Girl Panties

Superintendent 8 exudes excellence in every way: in her speech, appearance, demeanor, and accomplishments. She brings to her superintendency years of varied leadership experience and uses these experiences to work for the best interests of students. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, superintendent 8 highlighted how integrity is integral to all her actions. This narrative strategy of integrity is demonstrated through her vision for herself and work, through her focus on positivity in the face of challenge, and in the self-assurance of her identity as a mother, female, and African American.

I Was Always the Principal.

Superintendent 8 makes meaning of her leadership through a narrative strategy of integrity. One way in which this narrative strategy manifests in the superintendent’s leadership story is through her vision for herself and her work, one she has had from a young age. In this vision, she maintains a clear commitment to her purpose as an educational leader. She established this commitment to becoming an educational leader early in the interview with the researcher by telling an anecdote from her childhood years:

Sure. I was one of those young ladies who knew, uh, right from the get-go that I wanted to be in education. And I knew that I wanted to be Secretary of Education some day. I knew I had to play every role in order to get to do that, because I talk about people who don’t spend their time learning their craft. So I really had this big vision, um, of, you know, over education some day… And thinking about the steps I needed to take to make that happen… [Being in this role] in many ways [is] refreshing. Because it is exactly what I wanted to do. My mother used to pick on me because she’d say we would play house and school and teaching… And all of that in the garage on Sunday afternoons with my cousins. And I would never be the teacher. I was always the principal. And I made my boy cousins be the teachers and the students. And I was always the principal.
While so many women are inculcated to suppress their ambition to not appear greedy or conceited, superintendent 8 maintained integrity in her vision for herself and her work. While she does not degrade the role of teacher, her illustration of herself as a young girl who was “always the principal” establishes her as destined to lead. Similarly, no role was too big for her dreams; she knew as a young girl she wanted to be perhaps the most powerful educator in the U.S. as the Secretary of Education. This illustration of superintendent 8’s grand vision for herself as a female educational leader depicts her commitment, integrity to herself as a leader and has allowed her to maintain focus on that meaning.

In establishing the vision for herself early in her life as a female educational leader, superintendent 8 recognizes such success only results with hard work and dedication to such a vision. Accordingly, the superintendent complemented her goals with a vision for her work to attain her desired achievements. She committed herself to understanding the complexities of the educational field by experiencing the variety of the roles first hand. She explained to the researcher why this is critical to her leadership:

Because I’m a firm believer that you must be knowledgeable about every step in order to truly do the work well.
Even in this role, I understand that my being a coach, or my being a lateral entry teacher, or my being any of the things I’ve done…
It’s helped prepare me for this seat.
Topics and issues come up everyday and there’s some I go, “Oh, yeah, this is what you need to do.”
Only because I’ve experienced it.
I haven’t read about it in a book.
No one’s told it to me.
It’s not necessarily in a policy.
But because I’ve experienced some things do I know exactly how to respond, or at least where to start with the response.

The superintendent does not want to read about affecting change; she wants to have experienced the work and have learned the tools necessary for affecting change as an educational leader. By
engaging in a wide variety of educational leadership experiences, she approaches the superintendency with a knowledge and skill set to effectively lead in any situation. In addition to her commitment and integrity to the field in ensuring she has done the work, she also illustrates this vision to herself and her work likewise translates to doing what is right for all stakeholders in the district. She depicts this narrative strategy of integrity through her vision for her work by remembering what it was like to be a principal:

Now that being said,
if anyone upholds the standards and the policies it’s got to be me.
I have to be right.
So a lot of my work is with our board attorney, it’s with my board chair, it’s constantly in communication with the mayors in town, or as of late with the sheriff and the chiefs of police in town.
I constantly am seeking, not just innovative ways to do this work, but ways to do this work right….
And ways to make sure if it needs to be replicated it can be because we did it right.
So it’s constantly thinking.
In this seat you are constantly reinventing.
You’re constantly towing the line and making sure that others know they can count on you for that…
Or it’s like the work I did today: it’s constantly being visible so that people know I care about them.
And that I believe has been the most, um… I learned… what I’ll say is I think I underestimated how important that was.
And my experience as a principal is what I rely on for that.
I can just recall the places I’ve been in when I saw no one, no one from central office and certainly not my superintendent…
And I recall very vividly how I felt about that.
That was terrible and I didn’t think much of those people.
I thought: “They don’t care about us at all!”
And I just don’t want those things said about me.
So, I really try to rely on my experience to determine how I act and respond because I just… I don’t forget.
I don’t forget the feeling, you know, how I was made to feel.

For superintendent 8, her integrity requires she does more than dream or plan for her own success; rather, it is important to her identity as a leader to use her dream and experiences to ensure she is the most effective leader possible for her staff and students. Her integrity requires
her to be the one who does the work correctly and “is right.” She feels a sense of responsibility to knowing the policies, procedures, and practices that ensure an excellent school system. Drawing on her experiences as a principal, she commits herself to remembering that vantage point to inform her actions as a superintendent. In considering the vision she established for herself at a young age, her commitment to intimately knowing the variety of roles in the educational field, and her focus on ensuring those experiences inform her practice, superintendent 8 leverages integrity as the narrative strategy that allows her to make meaning of her experience as a female leader.

“**You Just Love Your Job.**” And I do. I do!

In addition to integrity displayed through her vision for herself and her work, superintendent 8 also demonstrates her narrative strategy of integrity through her positivity. Regardless of the circumstances she faces, the superintendent maintains a strict focus on the positive possibilities of each situation. In this focus on positivity, the superintendent can deal with difficulties and ensure progress is made.

The superintendent illustrated this form of integrity as she worked through a highly contentious political situation at the beginning of her superintendency. When there were plenty of opportunities to focus on the difficulties of this circumstance, she instead fought to find the possibilities for improving. As the superintendent described her work with local politicians, she made evident how she makes meaning of her leadership through a focus on positivity:

> When I arrived the relationship [between certain politicians] was terrible, and so one of my goals….
> I’ve heard all these stories about how the liaisons from both groups would sit in the room down the hall and no one would part their lips to say a word.
> Well, for me, at the end of the day I can go to sleep at night with a good conscience when I know I’ve done everything I can to get what the children and folk in this school district need.
> That can’t happen if I behave that way, and so I’m not, I’m just, I’m not.
So, what I did to approach this was to over-extend myself. I’m here; I’m new. I showed up to a couple of [specific political group] meetings and totally shocked them. I invited the [specific politician] over, took him out to lunch, and just, you know: “Hey, here are some things I think… what do you think?” So, here we have all these relationships that were either broken or tainted… and my job really was to come in and clean it up… Because you are not going to get a penny from a [specific political group] as a superintendent if they are all ticked with you or if they don’t like you… So I had to do a lot of prefacing: “I understand that Mr. Such-and-such… may or may not have an agenda against [this political group], but that doesn’t have anything to do with me. Give me a fresh start. Give me an opportunity to work with you.” And they did. They really supported schools… but that didn’t happen because I’ve been ugly or nasty or just kept the trajectory moving forward the way it was. No, no, no. I had to really work behind the scenes. I had to show up to events… Let me see what I can do to help. I think a superintendent has to be very careful to work the systems to the district’s advantage… and that sometimes means being the bigger person and extending olive branches that you didn’t even know you should have to have. But once you hear the stories and such it is incumbent upon me to get money and resources for this district…. and I have one vehicle [to do that.] So, that means I had to put on my big girl panties and do whatever it took, of course legally, to make sure they listened, they heard. I think my job was to make sure they knew I was genuine. They knew I was sincere. They knew they could count on me to do whatever I said we were going to do to come back and educate my board. And we’ve really settled the sea a bit this year… and I’m proud of that… because it took a heck of a lot of work to fix something I didn’t break.

In entering the new role, the superintendent entered a highly difficult political situation. Rather than take sides in the situation, she used a positive approach to repair the broken relationship. As she described three times in the illustration through various metaphors, she recognized her task
was to maintain integrity to “fix something” that she “didn’t break.” When she could have ignored these problems she did not cause, she instead recognized the need to maintain positivity and repair the relationships. By being “genuine” and “sincere,” she worked with both groups to focus on the needs of the district and ensure the best possible outcome.

The superintendent’s integrity through a focus on positivity was also illustrated in how she messaged her approach to the district’s work. She explained how she leveraged her integrity to directly address the negative political climate in order to set the tone for a new, positive movement:

I think it needed someone to come in who really could care less about what happened before I got here.
“I really don’t care.
But I do care about today.”
And I think it took someone who was big enough to say that.
“Whatever ailed you before I arrived, sorry, but I don’t do business like that.”
I had to say that.
“That is not what I’m interested in.
I am now mommy of [large number of] babies and my job is to advocate and protect and that is what I plan to do.”
And they all sort of were stunned in the meeting.
So, I don’t know if that’s as much about my being a female or just being someone strong enough to cut ties with whatever was wrong and say, say loud and clear,
“We are going to start anew.”
Parents appreciated it.
The [specific politicians,] they rallied around me…
which was a beautiful thing.
And we participate in [things] together and, I mean just…
we really tried to hit a restart button so to speak and to do it together.
And so they kind of echoed whatever I said and it just caught on.
“It’s a new day.”
“It’s a…”
It became the mantra for the first six months.
“It’s just a new day.
So whatever was wrong before, you might as well just let it go, because it’s a new day.
This superintendent is not interested.
“It’s a new day!”
And they would say it.
They would say it.
It was actually pretty neat.

Superintendent 8’s integrity is on display when she directly addresses the toxic political environment she has come into. By acknowledging this concern head on, she can communicate and establish a new expectation for their work together. While there was initial shock to her directness, her acknowledgement allowed all involved to move towards a better working environment. She then was able to leverage her integrity to shift towards a positive focus on establishing a “new day.” Her positivity was so infectious her words were adopted as a reminder towards their movement forward together. The superintendent’s narrative strategy of integrity focused on positivity allowed her to work through such a difficult, contentious political environment and ensure better outcomes for students.

Another way superintendent 8 demonstrates her narrative strategy of integrity is through her earnest joy of the work and her standard of excellence. When the researcher asked the superintendent broadly about her experience as a female leader, she explained how she enjoys the job and takes pride in ensuring she pays attention to even the smallest details:

My husband looked at me Sunday and he said, “God, you just love your job, don’t you?” And I go, “I really do.” I couldn’t wait to get out of church, because I knew there was an email coming in and I was waiting on this email, and he goes, “Really, [superintendent’s name], you could not wait to get out of church!” And he’s like, “You just love your job! And I do. I do.”… And I also try to add this little bow on top… Like this little spirit of excellence. You hear people talk about a high standard of excellence… but they have other folks to do it because I was the one who did that a lot. “Can we make that prettier?” “Can’t you serve breakfast?” “Can’t you give them a little gift?” “Can’t you…” That sort of thing. So I try to make sure that I do that…
For me, and I’m in partnership with about seven other females across the state who are superintendents and most of us think that way. We want to do things but we want to know: “Now what little thing can we get to make sure people remember it by?” Well, most of my male counterparts don’t think that way. They get the job done and they get it done well, but that layer? Uh-uh. Not typically there.

Regardless of the difficulties of the job, the superintendent has an earnest love of her work. This exemplifies her narrative strategy of integrity in her work. Also, the superintendent illustrates through this narrative strategy her care for the work. Her care is so great, in fact, she considers every detail in ensuring her employees have the best work environment. She articulates her belief that this is a function of her female leadership, that women pay attention to “tying a bow on top”: those small details that matter to people. In her positive approach, whether it is with contentious relationships, difficult political situations, or her love of the job and attention to detail, the superintendent leverages her integrity to make meaning of her leadership.

I Hurt More Than I’m Angry About It.

Most notable throughout superintendent 8’s leadership story was the integrity she employed in the self-assurance of her identify. In her narration of her leadership experiences, the superintendent’s identity as a mother, woman, and African American were challenged regularly and with marked attack. Considering the intensity of these attacks, it seems most would have questioned their ability to lead. Superintendent 8, however, faced these issues of discrimination directly, illustrating her ability to lead under any circumstance. Leveraging her strength and integrity, she never ceased to believe in her leadership capacity and instead remained self-assure. This strategy, in turn, allows her to make meaning of her leadership.

While the intersectionality of the superintendent’s identity is impossible to parse out, the researcher here identifies how the superintendent’s integrity allowed her to remain self-assure
when challenged as a mother and wife, a female, and an African American. In describing her relationship with motherhood and the superintendency, superintendent 8 expressed her deep commitment to her family:

One of the things I know I’m really good at:
It’s being [my child’s] mom.
One of the things I absolutely love doing is being [my child’s] mom, and I just wasn’t willing to raise everyone else’s children and forsake her and that’s what I saw superintendents doing.
All of the men I’ve worked for, because I did not work for a female superintendent….
One of the things I would constantly walk in their offices and say, “Shouldn’t you make it to that ballgame? You know this is a playoff. You know you can’t, you can’t miss the playoffs. You gotta be there for this…” or “Do you have your wife’s gift for anniversary?” You know that type of thing.
So I really…family means everything to me…
The one thing I knew, [my husband] and I were very committed to this one little gift we had…
I just wasn’t willing to forsake that for me.
I knew I could be a superintendent.
I had the papers to prove it.
I had the experience to prove it, but I was not interested until I got her sort of through college, and then so that’s why I waited until then to apply.
She is so proud of me doing this now.
She just like gets the biggest thrill, because she’s in a young womanhood sort of state.
She goes, “You know mom that’s pretty cool. This is pretty neat.”
But she, um, actually was telling the church the other week, she’s like, “My role model is my mom, because I don’t know how she keeps the groceries in the house and we’re all fed and clothed and all.”
I have to time manage to make it all happen, and so I do, but she’s taught me how to do that very well.
Uh, that might mean some midnight Walmart runs to get milk and cereal….
I will tell you but my husband is the sweetest.
When [our child] was a baby and I was principal at that time, one of the ways I was able to be principal is because of his support.
I did not have to touch that baby in the morning.
We would get up, you know…
He knew it took everything from me to get to that school before the first bus arrived or before school breakfast care…
and so I would do all my stuff with her at night and I would get everyone’s clothes laid out and all.
And he’d make sure she was dressed and he’d get her to daycare.

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And it’s not like he didn’t have a big job with [specific company] himself. But he was so supportive of what I needed. He did that and got it all taken care of and has through the years. So I, I just, um, I have learned great time management… but there are some things that I’m just not willing to sacrifice.

The illustration superintendent 8 narrates about her relationship with motherhood, marriage, and the superintendency highlight the integrity she applies to fulfilling each of these identities in her life. She explains her family is the most important aspect of her life Accordingly, she would not let her work keep her from being wife or mother. Just as important to her, though, was her aspirations of the superintendency. While she acknowledged work would not keep her from being wife and mother, she knew there was a season of life in which her identity as wife and mother would also not keep her from achieving her dream of the superintendency. Instead of these identities conflicting, they instead complement one another. Her ability to be a principal was possible through her identity as a wife, as she explained her husband was a true partner in supporting their family and child. In total, her identity is composed as all three labels; wife, mother, and leader, and she seeks to live out each of these identities with integrity to each role.

In addition to her identity as wife and mother, superintendent 8 acknowledged the challenges she has faced as a woman and leader. Throughout her narration of various instances of sexism, the superintendent illustrated how she maintained self-assurance in who she is as a leader and never allowed such discrimination to question her identify as a woman and leader. She first highlighted this narrative strategy through an anecdote that occurred early in her superintendency as she was meeting members of the community:

You know this one, um…. This one time someone wanted me to know loud and clear that they wanted a male and they are going to try a female. They are going to “try it.” That’s exactly how he put it: “We’re going to try you, now.” You know, just….
I went, “Yeah. Well, thank you.”
You know I wanted to say,
“Well, you know the board has already acted on it. I have a contract…”
I didn’t say any of that, I just…
But I was, you know, first time, maybe here two of three weeks and I’m attending all these community meetings and church stuff and, uh, outreach this and outreach that….
We were at the public library and that little old man walked right up to me and said, “Now you know…”
And told me all about the last superintendent.
“[Male superintendent’s name] was here and he would do this and he would do that and he…”
And I said, “That sounds so wonderful!”
And he said, “So we’re going to give you a try now. We’re going to try you…”
I thought…bless his heart.

In the situation the superintendent describes, the man’s statement to the superintendent reflects
the challenge women often face in leadership. From the start of her superintendency, her ability
to lead is challenged because she is a woman, and that ability is publicly compared to the
previous male superintendent’s ability to lead. The community member admits that he, speaking
for the public as “we,” will give female leadership a “try,” signifying the community does not
really like the idea of a female superintendent but they will see how it fares. When her identity as
a female leader is challenged directly by the community member, she does not allow his
statements to affect her poise. Instead of responding that the board had already hired her, she
simply responded with a “thank you” to the man. Additionally, when she is compared to the
former male superintendent, she does not degrade his leadership, she compliments it. In
reflecting on this conversation, she does not allow the man’s insult to affect her; instead, she
understands his inability to accept female leadership is a reflection of his own insecurity, which
she portrays by thinking, “Bless his heart.”
Her identity as a female leader was not only openly questioned by men, she also was the recipient of sexist remarks from women. The superintendent illustrated an example of this woman-to-woman degradation when dealing with a difficult student disciplinary issue:

I at another, um, point had a mom who was really mad. Her [child did something significantly inappropriate at] school, so we have to go through the whole hearing panel, come to the superintendent before you go to the board thing. And we get in here and she was still as mad as a rattlesnake. And she just wanted me to know how, um, terrible, terrible of a superintendent I was for upholding the policies... and their last superintendent, you know, he was a “Good man, Good man.” And I said, “So are you implying that I am just not a good woman because of upholding policy?” I had to ask her. She was so ugly it became comical and she said, “You’re not. You are not!...And that’s how women do!” That’s what she said: “And that’s how women do!” And it was from a mom and I thought, wow! And I said, “Well, I’m just as sorry as I can be that you feel that way.” You know, just let it go. You gotta let it roll.

In this anecdote, the superintendent again is compared to the previous male superintendent. As examined in the literature on the double bind theory, women are often labeled or criticized for others’ perceptions of their toughness (Ragins, Townsend & Mattis, 1998, p.30). Here, the superintendent is following discipline procedures outlined by the board of education. When she enforces those discipline procedures, she is described as a “terrible” superintendent and compared unfairly to the “good man” who was superintendent before her. The mother does not stop at simply calling into question the superintendent’s character, she also criticizes all women in leadership. In her statement, “That’s how women do!” she implies women in leadership who enforce the rules are overly harsh and terrible. The superintendent’s response to such attacks are again met with integrity and kindness. Instead of defending her femininity in leadership, the superintendent apologizes to the mother that her perception is inaccurate. She does not allow
sexist statements to affect who she is or how she leads. In both illustrations with the male community member and the female parent, when her identity as a female superintendent is questioned, superintendent 8 maintains integrity through her self-assurance. Through this narrative strategy, she can make meaning of her female leadership.

Of all her identities, the identity that has been the subject of the most challenging situations for the superintendent’s leadership is her identity as an African American. The superintendent explained her leadership ability as an African American female has been routinely questioned. She recalled a conversation she will “never forget” from her years as a principal that involved a parent of a student she had worked with for several years:

When I was principal of [specific school,] I will never forget the first time that really hit me.
I thought at the least—I mean you can look at my hair and tell, “She’s probably not Caucasian. We might not know what she is, but she’s probably not one of anything.”
Well this dad, who was very gruffy and kind of rough with the old Grizzly Adams beard and so forth…
His [child] had been to school with me all through three years of middle school and he was now a [specific grade].
I’ll just never forget it…a [specific grade] at [specific school.]
I’ve had your [child] in my care at that point for [specific number of] years.
This gentlemen made an appointment to come see me, and, um, this is how he worded it:
“You know—” and I wasn’t Dr. [last name] then— “You know Ms. [last name],
I’ve always liked you.”
And I’m thinking, where is this going?
His [child] hasn’t been suspended.
I’ve heard nothing, you know.
Progress report time is over, you know…what’s going on?
But that’s how he started: “You know I’ve always liked you.”
And he struggled, I have to say he did.
It caused him pause, and that’s how I knew he was truly feeling this way.
“I’ve always liked you. You’ve always been a mighty fine lady, nice—”
Gave me some accolades…
He goes, “But I didn’t know you were a niggrah.”
That’s what he said to me.
I said, “A what?”
And he said, “A niggrah.”
And I said, um, “Well golly, I’ve been called a lot of things, I didn’t know I was that. Never heard that word.”
You know I kind of turned it into a joke.
And he said, “Yep, that’s what I was told at my meeting the other night and I just had to come ask you myself. You know, are you? Are, are you?”
And I said, “Niggrah. Now my parents have never told me that I was a niggrah.”
I said, “I’m going to have to ask ’em ’bout this one.”
And he said, “Alright. Alright.”
And he was fine. He didn’t even get that I was joking him about the word ‘cause I think what you meant you didn’t say.
You didn’t say it right, but he never, um, it…it was…that was a first.
And it really, really struck me.

In this story, the parent acknowledges he had always appreciated and liked the principal, who had worked with his child for several years. Only when he discovered that she was an African American woman did he then question this appreciation and satisfaction with her leadership. As he explained himself, he “always liked’ her “but” (emphasis added) once he learned she was Black, he did not know how to feel about her. The man is in such disbelief, he felt is necessary to make an appointment with her to verify—to hear for himself—the news he had been “told” at a meeting. While nothing had occurred to his child or at the school, the man found it important to confirm her race. In response to his racist questioning, the superintendent retains her composure and attempts to make his comment into a joke. She acknowledges he did not even understand her joke because he had intentionally used the word “niggrah” to describe her instead of the word he “meant” to say. Here, the superintendent’s ability to lead—one the parent clearly established as a strong ability to lead—is questioned simply because she is African American. In the face of such racism, the superintendent is hurt, but her leadership ability remains unchanged. She maintains her integrity in the face of racism and leverages such integrity to keep the resolve to lead.

As she moved into the superintendency, she again faced circumstances in which her ability to lead was questioned because of her race. She illustrated this through a story about a comment from a community member early on in her superintendency:
There are other issues, not the sexism, as much as the race issue for me. That one has been a little… Here’s what I’ve noticed: People want the two together. That’s hurtful, yeah, but I am pretty self-assured. It’s sad, but I will hear more about the fact that I’m a dumb, Black female than female. And it’s so interesting… And one was really funny because this man called. And he wanted me to know: “You know I was so supportive of you and I still might be. I might be. But I did not know you were Black.” It was… it was… it was sad. And you almost have to laugh at it to go, “We’re in year what and you are still having that conversation?” And I said, “Well, what did you think I was?” I said, “Now I’m mixed. It’s all in there: Black, Native American, White… hunny, it’s all in there.” And I said, “It’s in there for a lot of us. You know?” He just, “No, uh-uh, uh-uh, I just, I just, didn’t think, you know, you were Black.”

The man’s comments to the superintendent in this story are racist and hurtful. He blatantly, directly challenges her ability to lead because of her race and openly states she may no longer have his support because she is an African American woman. As the superintendent reflects on this conversation, she explains her encounters with people in the community show their inability to separate her leadership capacity from her identity as an African American woman. While she should be able to be both a leader and a Black woman, the superintendent states people find this problematic because her identity as an African American woman has relegated her to be a “dumb, Black female” in society. This racist belief insinuates that to be an African American woman is to lack intelligence. As she acknowledges this racist mentality exists against her, she attempts to combat the man’s ignorance by acknowledging we all represent different races and cultures: “Black, Native American, White….” The man’s adamant response confirms his racism and his belief that the superintendent is a second-class citizen because of her identity. Even in
this hurtful illustration, the superintendent does not allow the man’s ignorance to affect her integrity. While she acknowledges his comments were “sad,” she understands such racism reflects his character and not hers. She attempts to “laugh” off the issue and move on, confident in her ability to lead.

The intensity of the stories superintendent 8 shared with the researcher allowed for an openness between the participant and researcher. In hearing about such blatantly sexist and racist challenges to her leadership, the researcher wondered how the superintendent could maintain such integrity and resolve to continue her leadership when there were such forces working against her in an already difficult career. When the researcher asked superintendent 8 where she found the strength to have such resolve despite these attacks, the superintendent explained how her upbringing gives her peace:

You know what…I grew up in a very interesting town.  
I grew up in a town, um, where there was a Coast Guard base.  
So we grew up around a lot of nationalities, a lot of races, and they weren’t long lived because people would get new orders and have to move.  
That’s just how the military goes.  
Growing up in a town like that with that influx of Indian and Arabic and African and you name it…  
I had a lot of exposure to a lot of different kinds of people who looked very different.  
And then growing up in a town where the university was one of the largest employers and my dad worked there.  
We grew up with those people in leadership positions.  
Then my dad ran for [an important political position] and he was the first African-American to do that.  
And then [he] was over the league of [important elected officials] for the state and he was the first African-American with that.  
So, I was accustomed to there’s still people in the world who don’t like certain achievements…  
because I’d had to deal with it my whole life.  
So, when I would call home and tell my parents these little stories and things that would happen, [they would say,] “My gosh, that’s still going on?”  
You know, that kind of thing.  
It wasn’t necessarily a shock.  
It’s more of a disappointment.
And...honestly, [my] faith.
I just, it’s sad to me.
I don’t even get angry.
And I don’t know that it bothers me as much as it would have had I not experienced it as a child…
but I have all my life.
And so it, just, doesn’t bother me to the place that I’m upset or frustrated.
It hurts my heart…
I hurt more than I’m angry about it.
In fact, I’d rather know where people stand, because when you know you can kind of deal with them in that lane…
rather than me deal with them from a place where I’m thinking something totally different.
So…it doesn’t bother me.
It makes me sad.
It does.

Growing up with diverse people around her afforded the superintendent two understandings.
First, it gave her an appreciation for others and allowed her to see people of color in positions of leadership, including her own father. Second, it made her understand at an early age that not everyone agreed with or was appreciative of diversity and of diverse people in leadership positions. As she explained, because she had learned these lessons at an early age, her resolve as a woman of color in leadership as an adult is strong; no form of discrimination will affect her leadership ability. While she is saddened by such ignorance, she acknowledges bigotry is not a reflection of her ability but a reflection of the bigot. Accordingly, she maintains faith and belief in her identity. Through her narrative strategy, superintendent 8 displays her integrity in her vision for herself and her work, in her positivity and focus, and in her self-assurance of her identity as a wife and mother, woman, and African American. In doing so, her integrity allows her to make meaning of her leadership.

Superintendent 9 – Why Not Me?
Superintendent 9 secured a superintendency despite the stacked odds against her. As she narrated her leadership story, superintendent 9 explained how she makes meaning of her
leadership through her focus on inclusivity, both for herself and others. This narrative strategy of inclusivity was developed in her leadership story through depictions of her relationships and her community involvement. Through these avenues, superintendent 9 makes meaning of her female leadership by ensuring she and others are included in the work of the school system.

**If I Have to Take Them a Plate of Cookies, Whatever It Takes.**

The superintendent leverages a narrative strategy of inclusivity to make meaning of her leadership. One way in which this is illustrated throughout her leadership story is through the relationships she has, including relationships with politicians, her staff members, and herself. In each of these relationships, the superintendent seeks to engage others in the process of leadership to ensure the best possible outcomes for the school district are met.

One of the relationships superintendent 9 worked to engage others in was in her relationships with local politicians. The superintendent explained how she worked intentionally to include all members of a local political group to repair broken relationships and, in turn, benefit students:

> [In working with a local political group, we] have a better relationship than we ever have had. Um…we have only primarily only gotten about [specific low percentage] of our budget from local, which is terrible. But um, this year we have gotten almost [twice as much.] So they’ve more than doubled their appropriation to us which I think is part of… I don’t know about being a female…. but it just… I worked really hard with them to build a good relationship. And I think sometimes that might be where females have… maybe have an advantage. We might see things a little bit on a compassionate level and maybe deal with things in a… looking at other people’s points of view. Sometimes, I’m not sure… Males are a little more linear in their thinking. We are a little more multifaceted you know.
I mean if I had to—this kind of sounds a little traditional and kind of selling myself out—but if I have to take them a plate of cookies… Whatever it takes, I’m going to do whatever it takes. Whereas I don’t think men are… Either they are kind of black and white, Either we are going to get along, or we are not. So, at this point we are really working together very well. But we’ve had to, everybody’s had to give a little bit. And offer an olive branch. And I’ve had to take a little that I wouldn’t want to do. And they have too. I mean just to try to you know, make it work. But now on this side of it it’s so much better than it ever has been, and we work together very, very regularly and depend on each other.

In considering how to repair the broken relationship between the group of local politicians and the school system, superintendent 9 recognized the value in bringing everyone together, to be inclusive. She understands in this relationship there is “give and take.” To achieve this level of inclusiveness, she is willing to do whatever it takes, even baking cookies at the risk of “selling” herself “out.” To the superintendent, engaging in the stereotypic gender role of providing baked goods is worth the outcome she is seeking for students: an increased fiscal appropriation for the students of her district. Accordingly, she leverages what she describes as a female trait to “work together,” extend an “olive branch,” and ensure everyone is included in the work.

Another relationship in which the superintendent seeks to engage others is in her working relationships with staff. In particular, when she considers how to help more women advance into the superintendency, the superintendent describes how she works to include people into positions of leadership:

I think we ought to… I think we ought to make sure that we are as transparent in what we do up here so that…. I mean if really if you look at the role and you break down what we do its really that you’re a master multitask person.
And so I think people sometimes are um, maybe not um, aware of what the superintendent role is. 
So [we need to] offer some opportunities to shadow. 
We’ve tried to hold some meetings with our um… 
Even starting with our teacher assistants that… 
Trying to encourage them to get teacher positions. 
But you know I think even having conversations with some of our people that you see some strength in. 
Some that, they have, you know, some leadership skills. 
Cultivating that by having them lead projects, giving them the authority to do that. 
I think that’s something… 
I can give up authority a little easier sometimes I think than some of my male counterparts. 
I don’t have to have my hand in everything to get you know… to make sure it gets done.

In lieu of seeking to retain power, superintendent 9 actively looks for ways to distribute power. 
She does not glorify the position of superintendent and instead describes it in a way—“a master multitask person”—that makes the position seem attainable for any employee. Within her district, she looks for avenues for helping advance teacher assistants into teaching positions and works to distribute her work amongst the team. In these ways, the superintendent leverages relationships with her staff to include others in leadership and make meaning of her approach.

The final relationship in which the superintendent leverages her narrative strategy of inclusivity is in the relationship she has with herself. This self-value was demonstrated first in the superintendent’s description of the tremendous amount of work she did early on in her career to prove her ability to lead. When the researcher asked about the superintendent’s pathway into the role, she described the difficulty of achieving it:

[Participant]: It really is tough. 
I mean I think you have to fight really hard to find a good balance…. 
If you’ll let yourself you could work for 12 to 14 hours a day. 
I had to almost make an appointment with myself to leave. 
You know, I mean… cause you look up and it’s like 8 o’clock at night. 
And you’re still busy because you never run out of things to do. 
But I think that’s part of the balance is, and it took me a long time, I did spend too much time at work.
And really, I could have gotten the same thing accomplished I just thought I couldn’t leave. I wanted to have it done, wanted to have this taken care of by the time I got back…

[Researcher]: So, did you desire to be a superintendent?

[Participant]: No, I desired to move to the central office. And then really about 5 or 6 years into it… I actually thought it couldn’t be as hard as what I’m doing right now! And then as I begin to spend more time, cause I’ve been here more of my career than I was in the classroom, then I began to… As I got a chance to monitor all the roles as superintendent, I knew that I could do it…. I think I had to prove myself, and I had for many years… I mean I knew that it was… it was…. I don’t think I desired it to begin with. But then I saw it as a role I’m very capable of doing. You know, and…why not me?

Throughout this illustration of the superintendent’s movement into the superintendency, she describes the hard work and countless hours it took to move up the ranks. There is a sense of sadness in her recounting of this time, as she remembers the investment she put into the work. As a woman in a district that had never had a female superintendent, she did not desire the superintendency. It was only as she worked through the several support positions to the superintendency she realized her value, that she was capable of the work required to be superintendent. In this reflection, she establishes a relationship with herself in which she begins to truly value her self-worth. Despite the fact she had never seen anyone like her as a superintendent before, this relationship allowed her to consider the possibility of the superintendency. Here, as she questions the thought—“Why not me?” (emphasis added)—she establishes her narrative strategy of inclusivity by realizing she, as a woman, is good enough. In her relationships with politicians, with her staff, and with herself, superintendent 8 seeks to maximize inclusivity and makes meaning of her leadership.
Who’s Your Construction Supervisor? Well, That’s Gonna Be Me.

In addition to her relationships, superintendent 9’s narrative strategy of inclusivity is illustrated through her community involvement. She described the uniqueness of her county, a place she “loves” tremendously, as one in which the community’s support of the school district and superintendent is critical to its success. Understanding this complexity, the superintendent ensured she connects with the community to include its people in consideration of the school system’s goals and objectives.

The superintendent demonstrated her engagement with the community through her dedication to working alongside others. When considering her approach, she explained engaging directly with others in the school system and community is fundamental to how she views the role of superintendent. She explained how these relationships between the school system and the community are reciprocal:

I’m a very hands on person.  
I ride buses.  
If I’m in a cafeteria, I’m going to help the cafeteria serve that day.  
I like to be involved with the kids…  
[And] if I need something, the community just steps up.  
I mean we have a lot of poverty in [our county.]  
We’re about [large percentage] free and reduced lunch.  
So, um…there’s a lot of kids that live in poverty.  
But they don’t do without in the community.  
For a lot of the resources that you know, we’re able to afford them.  
Like…we have clothes closets in all the schools.  
We do the backpack food program.  
But we also have food pantries so they can just come and go and get what they want to take home in the evenings with them.  
We do birthday clubs at school…  
You know birthday presents and birthday parties and um things like that.

The superintendent illustrates how she is a servant leader to her community. She rides buses, works in the cafeteria; there is no task in the school system she views as beneath her. This establishes her within her community as a superintendent who is willing to engage with others.
Such engagement, in turn, allows her to connect with the community and bring much needed resources to the students in her schools. In this involvement with her community, the superintendent works intentionally to ensure inclusivity of all people.

Another way in which she engages with the community to ensure inclusivity is through her work to establish a vision for female leadership. In addition to her focus on working hard within the school system, she likewise works to combat stereotypes of women in leadership as she encounters them. When asked about the most difficult part of being a female leader, she described such a scenario when she was working on school building repairs:

Working with some agencies outside the school… like when we are doing a construction project. I’m always asked, “Well who’s your construction you know, supervisor?” “Well that’s gonna be me.” You know, I mean, of course what they don’t understand is that I’ve got a background in construction because my dad was in construction so… probably I’m a better qualified person than somebody off the street. But um, I think they just tend to look around for what guy is going to do that, you know?

As she explains, superintendent 9 enjoys overwhelming support in the community and works intentionally to engage the community in the system’s work; however, there are instances within the community in which she experiences stereotypes of women in leadership. In the illustration of working with an outside agency that asks who her construction supervisor will be, she is reminded of the stereotypes holding women back. Instead of assigning this construction task to someone on her team, she answers the question directly, stating she will be the one taking on the assignment. In this simple exchange with a community member, she sets a precedent that women are capable of leading a variety of ways, even in school construction. Accordingly, by engaging with the community member, she seeks to ensure inclusivity of all women in leadership.
Through her relationships and in her community involvement, she establishes her narrative strategy of inclusivity and makes meaning of her leadership.

**Superintendent 10 – Women Are Promoted for Their Performance**

Superintendent 10 is a woman with decades of experience serving students in multiple public school systems. She has a deep understanding and sense of wisdom around the role of gender dynamics in the school superintendency. After a long day of difficult work, the superintendent’s responses to the researcher’s questioning in the interview were marked by a relaxed yet thoughtful, insightful tone. From her responses, it was evident the superintendent is assured in her work as a female educational leader. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, the superintendent employed a narrative strategy elucidating her resolve to the difficult work of being a female leader in the public school superintendency. This resolve was made evident through stories of her own self-awareness related to the complexity of gender inequity and her ability to combat stereotypes with direct, bold response. In leveraging this narrative strategy of resolve, she makes meaning of her female leadership.

‘Cause You Worked Your Butt Off To Get There.

Superintendent 10’s storytelling of her decades of experience showed her resolve to the rewarding yet difficult work of leading public school systems. Her experiences show part of where she finds strength for her resolve comes from her self-awareness. In considering the complexities of female leadership, she approaches her work with an understanding of herself to navigate an inequitable educational landscape.

The superintendent’s narrative strategy of resolve through her self-assurance to the work began early in her career during her first appointment to a significant central office leadership position. Although she was not seeking a promotion, she had a “powerful” male boss who
approached her about moving into a key leadership position. She explained how her placement
into this position was atypical:

[I] was working in [specific county] as…in a support role.
And [specific male name] was the superintendent then…
and he used to be [key political position]…
and he came back after he retired after we had fired a superintendent.
So he came in for a one-year interim period of time.
And he kinda had power and authority to do anything he really wanted to do, in
that small community.
And decided that he wanted me to be an administrator, in the, the school district.
And was going to demote someone and put me in that role, who had actually hired
me.
And so he brought me in his office one day, and said, “Do you wanna be the
[specific central office leadership position]?”
And I was like, “Yes, but you have somebody in that role.”
And he said, “Well I don’t want him in that role. I want you to take that role.”
Um… and I said, “Well I don’t…you know he hired me? What are you gonna
do?”
And he said, ‘You don’t worry about that.”
And um… I said, “Well I don’t have my masters. I’m not certified.”
I mean I had been working on it, but I had small children at the time.
And he said, “Well you’re gonna finish it right?”
And I said, “Yeah, but I don’t think you can do that.”
“Well I can kinda do whatever I wanna do, [superintendent’s name], so it’s your
job to decide whether you want this job or not.”
And he said, “I need to know by 8 o’clock tomorrow.”
And I said, “Well this will be in the paper, people will be…”
He said, “Sure people will talk about you’re not qualified, you’re not certified,
you’re not all of that.”
He said, “After a week they’ll get over it, and you’ll be an administrator for
the rest of your life. Or you can worry about that.”
And he said, “So just let me know what you’re gonna do by tomorrow.”
So, the next morning I went to his office and said, “Yeah, I want the job.”

This illustration represents the beginning of the superintendent’s acknowledgment of her own
ability to lead in a male-dominated arena. When she was presented with the opportunity to take
her boss’s job—one she had demonstrated she could do but was not licensed for—she initially
worried about the perception of taking the man’s job. The interim superintendent’s words were
important to her decision and the remainder of her career: she could either worry about the
perception from others or she could take the job; either way, the decision was hers. She took the job and, accordingly, it set the foundation for her self-assurance for a career in which she would continue to have to ignore the perceptions of others while remaining sure of her own ability to lead.

After superintendent 10 moved into the role of superintendent, she began to discover strategies to demonstrate her resolve and be self-assured of her ability to lead, even in the face of challenge. This was true also as she considered the complexity of the relationship between the superintendency and motherhood, so she had to navigate the balance of motherhood and her demanding career by developing her own strategies. When questioned by the researcher about being a working mother, she explained how she developed self-assurance in the intersection of these identities:

You know I was trying to think back…
I was trying to explain this to my daughter-in-law the other day.
When I went back to get my master’s, and the children were little.
And I was trying…I was working all day, and a new job, and these [specific number] little kids.
And it was a very stereotypical home.
My husband traveled a lot….he was gone, he wasn’t there, it was like all on me.
I remember being so exhausted during that process.
And I think about it now, I think…how did I do that?
I’m not really sure how I did that.
But, I think I, have always been kind of driven career wise, and so people make that assumption sometimes that I must not care about my kids…
But, I do think that people’s perception is that you can’t be both.
And it is hard to be both…I mean it is hard.
And so I do think that my career has sometimes taken a forefront to the other.
But I always try to think about it. I have [specific number and gender of kids], so I always try to think about it with [them], that I was kind of modeling what I would expect them to do.
So while yeah, maybe I’m not at everything, or there were…
There were tradeoffs for that. In someway for them.
But, I don’t, I’m not, I have so many people talk about balancing their life, and I don’t think anybody really knows how to do that.
I think everybody has…they’re out of balance in some way.
That’s the hardest part for all professional people is trying to find that fine line.
I, I did a lot of things early on though…
I, I don’t clean my house.
I couldn’t tell you where a vacuum cleaner is.
I just gave that up a long time ago, and I’m not embarrassed of it anymore.
Like when people say… I don’t know that, I don’t know I just don’t do that.
I had to pay somebody to do that… so there’s things in my life that I know I don’t do well.

The superintendent does not attempt to minimize the difficulties of being a mother and having a demanding career. In reflecting on raising her children, she acknowledged it was so difficult at times she was “exhausted” and does not remember where she found the strength to do it. Even so, she recognizes the concept of work-life balance for her was found in what she describes as “tradeoffs” between these two realms of her life. She is assured, however, in knowing there is no such thing as true balance and, instead, she does not attempt to “do it all” as sometimes women often feel pressured to do. She is comfortable with letting go of cleaning her house or not doing “well” at some other things in her life. In this realization, she has developed a strategy for being both self-assured in her identities as both superintendent and mother.

Another strategy the superintendent described having built to confront gender inequity issues in her career regards her approach to decision making. As a female leader, superintendent 10 is cognizant of how women can easily be stereotyped in their approach. She explains how she has learned to deal with issues of appearing too strong or too weak when making decisions:

I think [I deal with stereotypes by] just being direct about it.
I don’t like conflicts anymore than anybody else does.
I dread those…
But I’ve learned that, if you can be kind but respectful, but say what you need to say, and not try to sandwich it between, “Oh, you’re the greatest principal I’ve ever had and I’ve ever known, but let me tell you, I’m getting ready to make you an AP, but you will love that because of this.”
Just trying to be really direct in conversation, and saying, “Here’s what I need you to do, and here’s why we’re gonna go in that direction.”
Um, and I also allow myself…
The, the ability to change my mind on that.
So if I have that conversation, I have that direct, and they give me a reason…
I, I have had people say, “Once you say that, [superintendent’s name], don’t ever
back down, don’t ever let anyone talk you into something else, and, because it
makes you look weak.”
And I don’t think so.
I don’t.
I think that it makes you look like you were a good listener.
That you don’t just make up your mind about everything, that you do listen to
that.
But, then after I’ve listened to that, I can be pretty clear on saying,
“Well I listened but here’s what we’re gonna do, or you made a good point, so
I’ve changed my mind,
and I’m gonna back up and allow you to do whatever the conversation was
about.”

In this narration, the superintendent explains how she has grown comfortable with her approach
to decision making, regardless of the potential stereotyping she may face from others’ opinions.
Her approach to be direct with others is critical to communicating her point; however, she finds
it important to listen to those with whom she meets to consider their needs. Although she has
been coached to never “back down” from a decision she has made because it makes her appear
“weak,” she finds strength in considering others’ perspectives. Because of her self-assurance in
her decision-making processes, she is comfortable considering alternate points of view without
worrying what others perceive about her ability to lead. Accordingly, she is able to maintain the
resolve needed to navigate the complexities of the superintendency and make meaning of her
leadership.

Another way the superintendent has worked to become self-assured as a female leader in
a male-dominated arena is through strategies in working with local politicians. Superintendent 10
recognizes the difficulties women leaders often face in the superintendency when they ascend
into the political realm. Accordingly, the superintendent has worked to adapt her leadership so
that she can manipulate their stereotypes to benefit both her leadership and the outcomes for her
When she was asked by the researcher about navigating the political realm of her job, she explained the difficulty of the work:

I think that there is a perception that you don’t know anything about sports, not really.
And, you don’t really know anything about finances…not really.
And, probably don’t know anything about running buses, or those areas, um, and so you have to gain that… That respect doesn’t come natural...
Again I think that stereotype or that perspective of…
“She probably doesn’t know anything about numbers,”
It comes in play particularly with the Board or the community.
And when I’m trying to get a budget approved, there’s certain things that I strategically ask my assistant superintendent, who is a male, to present…
Because I know I can get it approved quickest that way.
It’ll get less questioning, on that particular area, then if I present it…
I know it will go faster.

The superintendent is keenly aware of what others perceive of her abilities based on stereotypes of her gender. She understands in her work environment, she has to work to gain the respect of having knowledge of the school system’s varied operations. Because she is aware of these perceptions, she has adopted strategies to effectively deal with them. In the anecdote she provided in which she allows her male assistant superintendent to provide budget updates to the board because she knows it will go through more quickly, she has adapted to the gender dynamics that affect her in the role of superintendent. Likewise, she is self-assured in her capacity to lead and in using such strategies. Having recognized the stereotype and then designing a strategy to deal with it, she maintains the resolve to continue her work as superintendent.

When considering how the superintendent leverages her self-assurance to have the resolve to do the difficult work of superintendent and make meaning of her leadership, another strategy she has developed is understanding the differences in promotion for men and women.

While she acknowledges these differences and how women must work harder to prove their
value, she recognizes her self-worth and ultimately wants to be valued for who she is as an educator, not simply because she is a woman. When the researcher asked about the superintendent’s own explanation of the gender gap, the superintendent articulated how she perceives the difference between promotion for men and women:

Somebody said this recently, it was a quote that I heard:
“Men are promoted for their potential, and women are promoted for their performance.”
So, often they look at men and say,
“Well potentially he could be a really good leader.”
And they’re given the benefit of the doubt.
Where with women when you get in these roles, of leadership capacity, you did it cause you worked your butt off to get there…
Like you’ve already proven that you can do it!
You’re not really exactly given a chance to do it.
Rarely are we given that chance.
Even when I told you about the first opportunity with [the interim superintendent in my first district] when he said,
“I want you to be [important central office position] and I don’t care.”
It was because I was doing all the work.
And he knew I was doing all the work.
It, it, it… and he knew that he could get it further if he could just put me in that role instead of having to go through somebody to get that.
It wasn’t that he, I mean he might have said, “I see a lot of potential in you.”
And I do think that both of my male bosses that gave me opportunities um, saw some potential too, but it didn’t come without a lot of work prior to that.
And so I think that has something to do with it.
That often women have to show that body of work first and…
Where…because men are fewer in numbers they get recognized quicker too.
It’s like the pool in which they’re being picked from is smaller, and so it’s easier to get recognized and promoted.
And I just think, just tradition.
Forever it, it, it…was the leader of the organization.
CEO was always gonna be a man.
And it’s taken a long time to start to turn that over…
[Yet] I wanna be in the role because of who I am…
and I wanna promote those people who are ready to be in that role….because of who they are.
I don’t…I don’t wanna go to the place of, with the women saying, because they’re women I need to push them harder to get in these roles than I do these men.
But I wanna be daggone sure they get the same opportunity for people to see their work.
The superintendent’s example of the original job promotion she received provides insight into her awareness around the expectations for women and their work. While she recognizes the interim superintendent likely valued her, she states he looked to promote her because she was the one doing “all the work” for the department. As she explains, women are recognized for their contributions to the organization upon receipt of their work product where men are recognized for their potential contributions to the organization. Accordingly, women are expected to “work [their] butt[s] off” to be noticed and promoted. While she understands this, the superintendent remains self-assure in the contributions she brings and ultimately still wants to be valued—and wants to value others—for their work ethic regardless of their gender. To do so, she remains committed to providing men and women opportunities to showcase their contributions to the organization as to promote the best talent in the school district. Superintendent 10’s narrative strategy of having the resolve to do the difficult work in the face of challenge is demonstrated through her self-assurance as a female leader and allows her to make meaning of her leadership.

**I Think You Need to Call Your Attorney, and I Need to Call Mine.**

In addition to Superintendent 10’s narrative strategy of resolve being developed in her leadership story through her self-assurance, she likewise illustrated her resolve through her direct, bold response to blatant issues of gender inequity. Part of the self-assurance she has developed as a female leader in a male-dominated arena is a response to being outnumbered by men. The superintendent stated early in her career there were “not a lot of women” in district leadership positions and, accordingly, she did not have other women to lean on as mentors or confidantes in her role. Regardless, when she encountered situations of gender inequity, superintendent 10 found strength to combat such injustice head on, advocating for herself and the other women who have and will continue to follow in her path.
One of the issues of gender discrimination to which superintendent 10 showed her resolve involved a proposed salary for a position she received. She illustrated this inequity by explaining what happened and how she responded to the proposal:

[Participant]: Then, um, when [the superintendent] left, three years later...the school board there had always done a national search. It was um, a really good school district. It was a... it was a pleasure to work there. They asked me if I would be an interim superintendent, because [the superintendent] left, and like two weeks later he was gonna be gone, and we’re gonna have to hire an interim, would I be the interim. And I said no, that I really wanted the job. That I was gonna apply for the job, and I wanted to pursue the job. And, I thought that, that interim was kind of...would limit my chance of being a superintendent. And, I was interested in being a superintendent, and quite honestly I had already applied somewhere else, to be a superintendent. So, they said, “Well will you wait until we finish our search?” And I said, “No I won’t wait till you finish your search. I’ll be glad to um, you know, if, if you end up hiring me before they do then that’s great, or if they don’t hire me I won’t play any games with you...but I really wanna be a superintendent.” So, I wanted that to be clear. So, that very week the board called me and said, “Well we’re gonna interview you.” So, they interviewed me 4 hours. I had been working there for 3 years. Um, and um, we interviewed for 4 hours. That night about 1 o’clock in the morning [specific politician] called and said, “We’re split on whether or not we wanna do a national search. Whether or not that’s the right thing to do or not. And it’s 4 to 3. 4 people said no, 3 people said they wanted to. So we’re not doing a national search. We wanna name you as superintendent. But then, the 7 of us voted that we wanted it to be you. That just 3 people wanted a different process, uh to get there. And, uh but that you would serve us after a national search.” So that happened. Then the next day, [two politicians] and I sat down. They announced it that night. It hit the paper the next day that I was going to be the superintendent. We never negotiated any kind of contract or anything. And, so I remember, [specific politician] at the time, he said, “Well [superintendent’s name], um, we need to talk about your salary.” And they had been given a range for salary for superintendent. And, it was like 135-175.
The former superintendent, who was a male, was making 175, as you can imagine. They offered me 135. And I was like, “No.” (Laughter.) I really didn’t care… that was a big jump in salary for me anyway, but it was just the principle that made me mad. And I said well… And they… said, “Well if you think we’re gonna pay you the same thing that we paid your predecessor, and you don’t have any experience, then we probably need to do a national search.” And I said, “If you think that you’re gonna pay me the floor and expect me do to the same thing he did, then you do need to do a national search.” And, I don’t know where that came from… [Researcher]: (Laughs.) I know; I’m like… you’re a badass.

[Participant]: I know! (Both Laugh.) I usually can’t be that way, so I was like, I’m not sure where that came from, but I was so pissed off probably that… it came from that place… And I just stood up… And the [specific politician] was like, “Ahhh, let’s settle down, let’s settle down.” And I said, “No, I tell you what.” I said, “I feel like it will never be a conversation that we can ever get back again. So, I think you need to call your attorney and I need to call mine, and they need to talk. Because us talking in this way, um… is probably gonna be damaging to our relationship. So I think that needs to be decided between our attorneys.” They… said, “We can work this out.” I said, “Well, um if you’re thinking 135 we’re not gonna be able to work this out.” I didn’t care if it was 136. I just wanted… um, and one of the [specific politicians] at the time said during that negotiation, “Well [superintendent’s name] has a husband that has a good job. She doesn’t need the same salary that the former superintendent had.” And so I thought that the salary was more interesting in the process.

The superintendent demonstrated such poised fortitude throughout the entirety of this situation.

Even initially, when she was approached to take the interim superintendent position, she was direct yet graceful in her response to the school board. She was honest with her intentions: she wanted and desired to be a superintendent; she hoped it would be with their school district, but she would not wait for their decision. After the excitement of her appointment announcement,
she was hit by the reality of the proposed salary where the board offered her the absolute lowest pay for the position. At that time, she could have easily taken the proposed salary. Not only had the appointment been made public and publicized, many women often feel pressure not to negotiate their salaries for fear of appearing unappreciative or greedy or for fear of losing the position (Callahan-Levy and Messe, 1979, p.444). Regardless of these factors, she rebuked the offer on the sheer principle of being offered the lowest possible salary for the position. As she stated, she did not actually “care” about the money, as she was receiving a large increase in her salary from her current position. When she met resistance from the board to her rebuttal, she again did not back down and stated they could return to a national search should they believe her salary did not need negotiation. She handled the conflict rationally, calmly, telling the board she believed it was in their best interest to have their attorneys meet to negotiate the salary as to ensure their relationship remained in good standing. Even when the value of her salary was judged by her husband’s salary, she did not succumb to their rebuttals. In recounting the complexity of this conflict and the varied ways in which the superintendent’s worth was devalued due to her gender, the superintendent herself admits she did not know where her strength to respond came from. Regardless from wherever she drew such strength upon, she demonstrated direct, poised boldness in the face of inequity and her resolve to succeed. The experience and her strength allow her to make meaning of her female leadership.

After securing a superintendency, superintendent 10 has enjoyed tremendous success in her role but has continued to encounter occasions of gender inequity. When the researcher asked if she believed she had ever been treated differently because of her gender by a subordinate staff member, the superintendent quickly replied, “Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely yes,” as to confirm this form of sexism had occurred to her on more than one occasion. When probed about this
statement, the superintendent told the researcher about a time when she had been tested by a male employee:

   [Participant]: …one of the first things that happened when I… and I didn’t know anybody … when I [went to specific school system]. Uh, had a famous, famous…coach, a legend. Who um…[did something inappropriate….]
   So, um this comes to my attention…
   So I call the [male supervisor of the coach] and said, “Did you know there’s…” “Yeah I’m trying to get control of that.” “Trying to get control of it? What do you mean you’re trying to get control… you’re not dealing with the coach?” “Well you don’t understand. This coach is a legend.” “Um, I do understand….but um, we’re not gonna… not on my watch.” So he said, “Well you’re probably gonna need to tell him that.” I said, “Well, okay.” [So] I did.

   [Researcher]: Do you think that the scenario would have been the same, if you had been a male? Like would [the male subordinate] have tested you?

   [Participant]: No… he would have never said, “You talk to the coach.” … I think anything that has to do with sports, and it doesn’t matter. I mean, I’m a coach myself. So, it didn’t, it didn’t… I think that there is a perception that you don’t know anything about sports, not really.

In this scenario, the superintendent is challenged by the male subordinate because she is a woman. Instead of the male employee addressing the problem at hand directly when he is addressed by the superintendent, he redirects the issue back to her to resolve. By doing this, he is challenging her ability to deal with an issue involving a sports coach. When the superintendent could have easily told the male subordinate he needed to address the issue and could have told him to do it, she instead does not back down from the challenge and addresses it directly. Again, the superintendent faces a circumstance in which she is treated inequitably because of her gender. She responds with tenacity, dealing with the conflict at hand while maintaining her
composure. Here, her narrative strategy is demonstrated through her direct yet poised response to gender inequity.

One of the other challenges of gender inequity the superintendent has faced concerns her colleagues. As she explained, when she first became a superintendent, she did not have any female colleagues to lean on for support. She explained even now, when the number of female superintendents has increased, she often finds herself in situations where she will be the only female superintendent in a particular context. When asked by the researcher about the relationships she has with her male superintendent colleagues, she explained the complexity of being outnumbered by men in these working environments:

[Participant]: I…I can’t really remember having real issues with it. I think most of my male colleagues have respected the work I’ve done, and have been um… I don’t find that to be a real problem. Umm…I can’t remember ever feeling like I was treated in a condescending way, in the room, or that they devalued um, my opinion because of sex. Um, I am a really innovative, kind of change agent, and so I love studying about that, and doing that kind of work, and sort of read a lot. And I think there’s been times when, um, some of my colleagues have said, “Well that’s [superintendent’s name].” You know…that’s…but I don’t think of it in terms of sex. I think it’s been more in: “She’s not real traditional, in the way she thinks about the work.” Um…

[Researcher]: Do you think that’s done in a belittling way?

[Participant]: Sometimes…it’s, like, we have a [specific superintendents’ meeting], you know that’s like… and in our [specific superintendents’ meeting] they are all males except for me. Now we just had one female, a new female come into our [specific superintendents’ meeting.] That was a change. So, um yes, in that [meeting]…sometimes. I, I really even refer to it as: “Well that’s the good-ole-boys club.” But it’s not really just been the “boys.” There are about [specific number of] superintendents who are very traditional in their thinking, very traditional. They don’t travel, they don’t go to conferences, unless it’s a state conference.
Um, if you were to say,
“Hey guys, let’s read a book about new schools.”
Like, “It’s not what we do.”
Um, “Let’s get a national speaker to come in.”
“We don’t do that kind of thing.”
And then there are some that do, and, but they’re males too.
So those are males and females.
I, I tend to find the people who um, and this is a overgeneralization too, the
people who are going to be non-traditional thinkers are more likely to be females.
So, I align to them quicker for that reason I think…
They’re just willing to think differently about the work.

The superintendent explains one of her required superintendent meetings is dominated by men;
in fact until recently, she was the only female. When considering the working relationships she
has with her colleagues, she acknowledges they never treat her disrespectfully; however, they
describe her behaviors or actions as, “well, that’s [superintendent’s name.]” After being probed
by the researcher about whether this characterization is belittling, she confirms it sometimes is
done in a condescending way. She recognizes this “good-ole-boys club” does have male
superintendents that desire to be innovative, as she is; however, there is still a contingent in the
group that does not take her contributions seriously. Regardless of the male superintendents’
attitudes towards her, she continues to share her ideas and to be innovative. When it would be
easy for her to be silenced in this group of all male superintendents, she maintains her voice by
providing ideas for continued growth and success for the students in her school district. Again,
when the superintendent is confronted with gender inequity, she responds to the inequality with
direct boldness. Through her resolve to develop and maintain self-assurance and to oppose issues
of discrimination, the superintendent makes meaning of her leadership.

Superintendent 11 – Because We Need an Insider

Superintendent 11 knew when she began a doctoral program her ultimate career goal was
to lead a school system as its superintendent. Having worked for a number of superintendents in
various key leadership positions, the superintendent’s leadership identity has been shaped by lessons she learned from each of their styles and interactions with community members and politicians. As superintendent 11 narrated her leadership story, she explained the most pressing factor in her leadership style is having a keen understanding of the landscape in which she works. Her narrative strategy is one in which she illustrates and aligns herself as an insider in the community she serves. This narrative strategy was developed in her stories through her understanding of social norms and her approach as a tough yet appropriately feminine leader.

I Don’t Care if She’s Got Boobs or Not.

Superintendent 11’s narrative strategy is to be an insider. Because of the uniqueness of the school district in which she works, effectively being an insider in the community requires much more than simply living in the attendance area; rather, it demands a thorough understanding of the gender and social norms in the community, most of which are never actually expressed publicly. By having worked and lived in the district for decades, she has learned to acknowledge and understand these norms, which is important in her role as a key leader, and particularly important as a key female leader, in the community. Through this understanding, she makes meaning of and is successful in her leadership.

In the interview, the superintendent quickly established that understanding the unspoken gender norms in her community is critical to her understanding of leadership as a female superintendent. As she described her pathway to the superintendency, she explained the challenges of her appointment to the position, which had been unfairly tainted by difficulties between the board and a former school district leader. From these challenges, she described her understanding of the community’s view of women versus male superintendents:

[Participant]: I guess what, I guess to answer your question…
I do think that…
Ok I think that if there were a man and a woman [from the school district] who both had twenty-five years of experience in this community they would prefer the man.

[Researcher]: Why? What does the man have that you don’t have?

[Participant]: Well, I just think it’s what’s…
I think it’s these…pictures hanging on the wall.
I think it’s the image of the suit and the tie…
and the “I know that there’s coal stored in the bottom of [specific school]…
and I’m going to come to the hospital when somebody gets hurt in my bibbed overalls after I get off my tractor from raising my cows…”
and that’s a true story.

Here, the superintendent acknowledges in her workplace, men are more respected than women, even when they have equal qualifications and work experience. When probed to explain why, superintendent 11 identifies the cultural norms of the community as the reason for such deference to men. These norms include male work attire, the history of the male superintendent in the system, the knowledge of school buildings and materials, and the value of the type of work men do in the community, including raising livestock. This anecdote shows the superintendent’s understanding that in this community, working men are and will always be superior to working women. When asked about issues of sexism in the workplace, the superintendent further described perceptions of women in the community with a story about a local politician’s comments regarding the search for a superintendent prior to her appointment:

You know…well, would you consider that if….a board of five: four men and one female….
The female, a female says to a male board member: “Now you’re not going to be, uh, closed to a female if we have a great candidate in part of a search?”
And the answer: “I don’t care if she’s got boobs or not. If she’s the best one, I’m for her.”
So that’s an interesting way to answer that question.

The superintendent clarified this comment was not confidential, as it was made at a public board meeting. When one considers the statement made from the male board member, it appears his
intent in the comment is to communicate inclusivity. To him, should a candidate for the superintendent role “have boobs,” he would consider her in their search. His comment, however, sends a different message. By categorizing a female candidate as one “with boobs,” he degrades women such that their value is identified through their body parts. Importantly, his degradation of women as body parts is made in front of and in public. In doing so, this public figure communicates to an entire community women are not human beings; they are boobs. This illustration reinforces the gender norm in the community that women are inferior to men.

While the superintendent knows these gender norms exist in her community, she explains she does not feel as if she is directly discriminated or treated unfairly by such norms. She explains why the community accepts her as a female superintendent and why she believes she has not been mistreated because of her gender while simultaneously acknowledging the gender norms of her community:

I think in their mind they’re more accepting of me.
I think the gender is less of a critical factor because I’m part of the community….
So it’s kind of like on both sides.
I don’t really feel…I am probably less sensitive to it than I think some people.
Like I notice it more in some of my colleagues that would be, maybe a little more offended…by comments that…I don’t know.
Maybe I’m just a little bit more tolerant or I don’t know.
I’ve never really felt like…and well maybe this goes back to this.
I was raised…my mother was [older] when I was born.
Umm, two parents.
My dad left every Monday morning and came back every Friday night.
He traveled, um all my life.
I have three older sisters.
So I think…ummm, I’ve been raised in a very female-dominant family and very independent.
My mother raised us to be very independent at a time when that was probably not so much as it is today.
You know, but I think that was her…she raised us.
But um, she was very independent, too.
No college education but hard worker.
Um, and so, I guess I see sometimes how it’s more…to some people it’s more of an issue:
“I’m being discriminated against because of my gender.”
Or “I need to work so hard to prove that I can do this job because I’m a woman.”
And I guess I never really felt that way because I never really felt like that was an issue.
Maybe not until this time…somewhat.
Um…I was the first female principal at [specific school.]
I guess what I’m saying is if I felt like I had been penalized because of that then I might feel more inclined that I have to advocate for myself because of my gender…how about that?
Now…I’ve been in rooms before at universities where there may have been three men in the room and 12 women and somebody comes in the room to ask a question or look for somebody and they’ll approach the man. You know, those kinds of things, I notice.

As she explains, while the superintendent acknowledges and understands the gender norms of her community, she does not believe, ultimately, these norms have negatively affected her. The chief reason, she explains, is because in her community she is seen as an insider. This label then forgives or lessens the fact that she is a woman. Even though women are inferior to men in the workplace in her community, being an insider compensates for such inferiority. Also, while she acknowledges gender norms making women subservient to men exist in her community, she personally does not feel affected by such cultural norms because she is “less sensitive” to them.
Having grown up around all women, she was raised to be independent and tough. This independence, she states, allows her to remain unaffected by being ranked second to men. In reviewing her narration, however, there seems to be the slightest hesitation of doubt when she considers her appointment to the superintendent. She says, “Maybe not until this time…somewhat” as if she acknowledges perhaps she kind of felt some differential treatment because of the community’s gender norms while her appointment was considered. Additionally, she does acknowledge others who may not be as tough as she is likely feel inferior because of the community’s gender norms. Regardless of her perception of other women’s feelings towards
these established gender norms in her community, it is clear she understands they exist, and she uses this knowledge to leverage being an insider in the community she knows and loves.

In addition to gender norms in the community establishing women as secondary to men in the workplace, superintendent 11 understands how gender norms around motherhood are expressed in her community. With her understanding of these norms around women and motherhood, the superintendent is cognizant how her identity as mother intersects with her identity as superintendent. The superintendent reflected on this complexity of gender norms of the community and the demands of both roles:

[Researcher]: What about other people’s perception of you as a mother? How have you experienced that [in your pathway to the superintendency]?

[Participant]: Well…they…they. Like the community. The community likes that. And again I didn’t know how much they would like that until I saw their reaction to the fact that [a previous key female leader] didn’t have any children. That was very sad to me when I saw that for some people that [the key female leader] was being criticized for that. You know…so…so I think here. Umm…people appreciate it. You know.

[Researcher]: Tell me about your relationship with motherhood either in the superintendency or in the pathway to the superintendency.

[Participant]: Umm… lots of days, lots of years, I spent more time with other people’s children than my own. And I talk to my administrators about that now. And people talked to me about it too. You know and when I say that…my family is very supportive of my career. I’ve been both of my children’s principals. Loved it. I loved that. I wouldn’t trade that. It was never a problem…. I tried to work on the balance. I was very fortunate that again, you know, my mom’s very involved, helped me raise my children while I was in school. My husband’s very supportive. You know I think that makes a difference. I didn’t miss their things. You know what I mean? If they had something I made sure I was there or somebody was there. But you know, it’s a hard job. And to do it right you’ve got to work at it.
There were times when I was with them that I wasn’t with them. And I probably regret that more than um….than…the work time. You know?

[Researcher]: What do you mean that you weren’t with them?

[Participant]: I was on my phone. I was talking, texting, connected, checking email. You know, we’re riding through Napa Valley in California and I’m worried about opening school…. That was me. And now in retrospect I think, you know I really didn’t have to be doing all that then. But it was almost like, such a….you know. Because I’ve always had this…this incredible drive to be great. And be the best I can be. And work hard. Even when I was working on my dissertation… I remember we were visiting in [a major city] that summer and they were asleep or whatever and I was downstairs in the lobby doing…the same kind of stuff. You know, it’s kind of like…always…. it’s always kind of been like an appendage.

In the community where the superintendent lives and works, there is value placed on women being mothers. As she described, the community “likes” she is a mother, and that was made especially clear to her when a former key female leader in the school system was not a mother and was criticized for such. If the community values motherhood to the extent where women are devalued for not being mothers, it is clear an unspoken gender norm within the community is the expectation women should be mothers. But as the superintendent describes her work experience in balancing motherhood, she illustrates that being a mother and a school leader is a demanding and difficult complexity. While the community has an expectation of women as mothers, the community likewise has an expectation of its female school leaders to spend tremendous time in helping “raise” the children of the community. The superintendent illustrates her “years” of work were and continue to be so demanding that it has and continues to consume all her time. No matter where she goes, there has been an expectation of connectivity, a connectivity so
impossible to escape the superintendent describes it as “an appendage.” This literal connection of work to her body is explained by the superintendent as her own personal expectation of always producing exceptional work. In addition to her own personal expectation, the superintendent’s previous description of women as secondary to men in the community provides a depiction of the superintendent, as a woman, feeling pressure to prove her ability to lead as well as a man would throughout her career. While the community’s expectation of women is they should be mothers, there is the additional norm of women needing to prove their value in the workplace. Working together, these gender norms establishing women as mothers and women needing to work harder than men to prove their value inform the superintendent’s leadership as a woman. Because she recognizes these norms, she adapts to her context and makes meaning of her leadership as a woman.

Another social norm in the community the superintendent successfully navigates in her work is the understanding of politics and the importance of political visibility. In the district, political power for a specific political party and your associated visibility as a politician throughout the community are greatly valued and respected. These norms are of such importance that they are an expected part of the superintendent’s work and affect the degree to which her work is deemed successful. As the superintendent recounted her appointment to the superintendency, this emphasis on political prowess and its importance in the community was illustrated through her story telling:

[This town] is loyal. They want people who want to be here. That’s them. Um, and clearly…I mean I’ve given my whole life to this school district. And so [as the board was working through the superintendent hiring process,] we, um, had a [very important political event] on a Sunday afternoon, the first Sunday in [specific month].
And one of our [local politicians]—we’re very Republican, very white, and we’re very Republican in [this town]—and so one of our [local politicians] who’s a Republican and I [know] his children and he…
And um, so I had seen him at…a ceremony…back in [specific month] and he ca-, he got my cell phone number and called me, and he said, “Do you want to be our next superintendent?”
And I said, “With everything I have.”
And he said, “Well I’m going to work on that…because we need an insider, um, and we need someone who cares about our community”….
And so, I appreciated that.
And then on that Sunday in [specific month]…the first Sunday in [specific month] we had the [important political event].
All the [local politicians] were there.
Um, which I had met with in the fall and had established relationships with them.
I didn’t know them…I met with them one-on-one or one- or two-on-one.
Started forming a relationship with them.
The [political event] was a huge celebration.
Um, very political.
Lots of people with political power were there.
And I could see, at different times, those [local politicians] or some of the other people that are political figures having conversations with [others], individually.
I just think like it was the perfect storm.
And so at that next board meeting in [specific month], um, they went in closed session of course I was never in there and they pulled out of the [national] search [for superintendent].
Came right back out…and said, “We’ve seen, we’ve heard…we see it’s very clear that [superintendent 11 is] who we want.”
And so, in another week we worked out the contract, had to call a board meeting, and that’s how that happened in [specific month].

The norm of the importance of political power in the community is clearly established in the superintendent’s appointment to the district’s top leadership position. After communicating her strong desire to lead the school system to a local politician, the superintendent literally saw the power of political connectivity occur in front of her at the event. Because she was identified by an important political figure as an “insider” in the community, her association with and endorsement from the politician led to her achieving her dream of leading the school system.
Working within their established norms of political power, the school board dropped the national search for superintendent and named superintendent 11, the newest political insider.
Understanding the established norms around political power, the superintendent navigated and leveraged such norms to become superintendent.

In addition to political power, the community places value on political visibility. In the role as school system leader, superintendent 11 is viewed as a political figure within the community and there is a high level of expectation placed on her attending various events throughout the community. Specifically, there is tremendous value placed on attending sporting events. She explained this community expectation:

One day [I was] just chatting [with someone] and one of the things that our board…
Again, boards are different…
But one of the things that’s important to our board here is that you’re visible in the community. You know what I mean?
And that, you go to Friday night football games.
You don’t have to stay the whole time and they’re not checkin’ in to where you are but that’s important to our community….
I’m like why wouldn’t you go to a Friday night football game?
[As a principal] I was somewhere every Friday night, sometimes two place…

The superintendent understands and appreciates the expectation of her visibility as a political figure in the community. Having been a high school principal, the superintendent appreciates and happily attends Friday night events. Interestingly, she communicates the board’s value placed on her visibility specifically at high school football games, a game dominated by males. Through the importance placed on such political visibility at a male-dominated sporting event, the gender norm of the superiority of men to women is again communicated through expectations of political figures. Through her understanding of gender and political norms in her community, the superintendent establishes herself as an insider in the community. This narrative strategy allows her to adapt to such norms and helps her make meaning of her leadership as a female superintendent.
You’ve Got Bigger Balls Than Any of Them.

In addition to demonstrating her narrative strategy of being an insider through her understanding of social norms, superintendent 11 also illustrates her strategy through her approach as a female leadership. Because she has a keen sense of what gender norms are acceptable and unacceptable in her community, she leverages these understandings to effectively and successfully lead as a female leader. Though she acknowledges she is a woman in a “good-ole-boy network,” she explained her tenure as superintendent has been remarkably successful and notably well received. As she narrated her leadership story, it was demonstrated this success is a result of her approach. In her work and interactions with others, she navigates the double bind theory, leading in a socially and culturally appropriate tough yet feminine way (Ragins, Townsend & Mattis, 1998, p.30). Her navigation of the appropriate leadership approach as a tough yet feminine leader gives her the ability to be an insider within the community.

As a female leader, superintendent 11 is first appropriately tough. During the narration of her leadership story, the superintendent described herself with adjectives of toughness in three separate illustrations. Her primary evidence of being strong and the respect she receives for her toughness in the superintendency was described through her work as a former high school principal:

…when I was in the [specific leadership program]…
a man that is a thought leader that was there and was a high school principal.
He said to the whole group…about the high school principalship is the number one pathway to the superintendency.
He said, “Nothing prepared me for the superintendency like the high school principalship did.”
But I’m thankful for that [high school] experience because so far nothing have had I face or deal with…
I can liken it all to [being a high school principal…] 
One other thing I think when we’re talking about that how have I had to deal with that.
I think, too…people have a different level of respect for educators who have spent time in the high school. Like as a high school teacher or a high school principal. So I think that…I think that helps.

Being a high school principal gave superintendent 11 a wide range of experiences she draws upon in her work as superintendent. In addition to the experience it gives her, she likewise gains respect from her community for her high school experience. As she continued to consider how her work in the high school principalship prepared her for the superintendency, she explained how it has affected the perception of her ability to be tough as a female leader. When the researcher asked about how her employees view or treat her as a woman in power, she again drew on her high school principalship experience:

Again… I think that is different here because these people…they know me. And many of them have [worked with me directly before.] Um…we promote from within in [this community] for the most part. But um I think that that’s again…I think that comes back more to my experience of working…see they love that I’ve worked on all three levels. You know they love that I’ve been a high school principal. So I don’t think [being a woman in power is] really an issue for them. And I even see a little bit of a difference in some of the people on my senior leadership which, they’re all brand new, to the role. But you know one has worked on the elementary [and] middle level. Very strong personality. Another was a female high school principal and I even see maybe some differences. But they’re both very well respected you know I just… I swear I think it comes back to that high school principalship. Because I think that in people’s minds that’s such a male-dominated scene. So I think they think that if she can do that….so I think it has a lot to do with that. Not that you couldn’t overcome otherwise.

Not only does the high school principalship experience afford her respect within the organization, it likewise provides respect for the other “strong” women in senior leadership positions within the school system who have also had the same experience. As the superintendent describes, the high school principalship is a “male-dominated’ scene. In North
Carolina, it is the only level of the principalship that remains majority male (2017-18 Education directory, 2018). This experience provides the superintendent the image of her ability to be “tough,” describing how people think “if she can” handle the high school principalship, then she can handle being tough enough—male enough—for the superintendency. In considering this toughness, she illustrated an anecdote from her experience in the high school principalship. When she was asked by the researcher about sexism in the work place, she first described her personality but then described how others perceive her:

I’m a pretty strong or dominant…
I have a strong personality.
And so I think that I might feel differently [about comments about women], maybe, if I weren’t.
Oh, here’s another thing that I can give you a perfect example of….
But I was the principal of [specific high school.]
A man said to me one time when I was making some hard decisions and communicating things…
Um, and I told you I was the first female principal there…
“You know I worked with [a large number of] people who sat behind that desk and you’ve got bigger balls than any of them.”
So that probably answers your other question, too.
But again….to me….and probably part of it comes with my familiarity with here and being here, you know.
Not that I took that as a compliment…I knew what he was saying.

In this anecdote, the superintendent—then a high school principal—is praised for her toughness by an employee. The praise for such toughness is gifting her male genitalia, as if to say that she has demonstrated toughness such that she is now one of the boys. While the superintendent does not take the figurative gift of male genitalia as a “compliment,” she understands his comment acknowledges a respect others have of her for her ability to be strong and dominant as a woman in a man’s job. As she illustrates in all of her narrations around her high school principal experience, the experience provided her the opportunity to show others she can work with and be one of the men. Having demonstrated her ability to conform to a man’s job, she is then tough
enough to align herself to other men in the likewise male-dominated arena of the superintendency. The high school principalship and its associated respect and image of toughness is her ticket to being an insider as a woman in a leadership role filled with men.

As a female leader, superintendent 11 is also appropriately feminine. Because she understands the importance of gender norms and expectations within her community, the superintendent recognizes that as a woman in power, she must be appropriately tough yet also appropriately feminine in order to successfully navigate female leadership. Such navigation allows her to be an insider both in the role and within the community.

One way in which the superintendent displays her understanding of appropriate femininity is through her role as mother. As discussed previously, the community in which the superintendent works has an unspoken yet established expectation that women should be mothers. Understanding this social norm, the superintendent leverages her motherhood to benefit her image in the community as appropriately feminine:

When I meet, as far as the school perspective, when I meet with parents and they say, “Well we don’t want that for our children.”
Like even when I was a principal.
Like, “Well we don’t want the teacher who’s going out on maternity leave or blah blah blah.”
And I say, “Well both of my children have had teachers who have gone out on maternity leave and we always try to do the best we can to find the quality people to get in there you know, duh duh duh.”
So anytime I can use them: “Well it was good enough for mine.”
You know, so I think that’s helped.
When I first got the job as the [superintendent,]
and I really do believe this,
I don’t just use this for my advantage,
and people ask about my experience with [the schools in our district,] I talk about I was a teacher and I was an administrator and I worked at the district office level but I’m also a parent.
And so I’ve seen…I think my children got a great education in [specific district] schools.
So like and I honestly believe that.
But at the same time I also use that.
And I think I should. You know I think that people when they come in to talk about their children and you know I think I’ve said this… I remember saying this at [the high school]. “You know no matter how many degrees I have hangin’ on the wall,” And like, “I’ve got your 1600, you know I’ve got these kids. I’ve got these.” But in relating to parents I would say, “But the [specific number] I have at home that’s the most challenging work and the hardest job that none of this (pointing to the wall) prepares you for.” So I think people like it when you can relate to them. On that level and sometimes….and I use them a lot for that and it’s always true. You know there’s not much…I’ve been pretty fortunate but you know I’ve had to deal with some stuff with my kids too. So I think people appreciate that.

The superintendent understands the importance of her role as mother in her identity as a female superintendent in the community. While she is earnest in her description of the quality education her children received, she acknowledges leveraging her motherhood and her experiences as mother has aided her image as a human. Because she has to be appropriately tough as a woman in a male-dominated arena, she leverages motherhood to soften her appearance within the community. Because motherhood is an expected norm for women in the community, it affords her an image of being appropriately feminine as a female leader. While she conforms herself as a female leader as able to work in “the good-ole-boys club” she understands she cannot be so aligned to men that she has lost knowledge of her responsibility to be a mother.

In addition to motherhood, another social expectation of femininity the superintendent employs is silence while working hard to prove herself. Understanding how women’s voices are perceived, she considers her words before speaking when she is surrounded by men. Also, while the superintendent understands social expectations for women to not speak up as often as men, she likewise understands women have to work harder to reach the same outcomes in leadership. When asked about how she may or may not adapt her behavior based on gender norms and why she thinks are so many fewer women in the superintendency, she explained this complexity:
When I meet with our [specific group of] superintendents… it’s mainly male. There are a few female….but I feel…like maybe I’m a little more careful about speaking out. I really want to make sure what I’m saying… You know I think about it more…. When I was a principal, this is what I said, to be honest with you. “Well the reason there aren’t many men in this [masters of school administration] program is…” I used to think: “They don’t want to work that hard.” In all honesty I did. That was my frame of reference of who I worked with. Now, I might say differently now. It’s just different. I just think that the expectations of the superintendent much like the principalship we’re so moving away from that management. We’re moving away from that. And I just think that, and I don’t know if it’s just innately or if it’s just… I think with the expectations and the changing role of the principalship it’s just evolving to the superintendency. So I think when you see a greater number of female principals and you know we’re just catching up. It’ll probably never be…it’ll be interesting to see what happens in the next 10 years in the state. As far as the number of male versus female. I think that for some people it makes a difference still in North Carolina to have a male versus a female superintendent.

In this illustration, the superintendent describes two competing yet related expectations of femininity: an expectation of silence while working harder than men to prove her worth. She acknowledges when she is in a superintendents’ meeting, she and the other women are outnumbered by men. Because of this, she is more cognizant of what she says out loud, as to ensure her words, when actually spoken, will be respected and well-received. In such a context, she is careful to not be herself and, accordingly, her voice is silenced. While there is an expectation for her to be appropriately silent as a woman, there is a competing expectation she must prove her worth in the “good-ole-boys club” to be harder working than the men. As she described, when she entered the principal preparation program, she found there were more
women in the program. Her explanation for more women in the program was men did not want “to work that hard.” She articulates that in her experience, she found men did not work as hard as women did. The counternarrative in this articulation is the burden of expectation women feel to work longer hours, to be visible, to be perfect in their workplace to be valued in leadership. As she considers the future of the superintendency, the superintendent considers how the educational leadership landscape may look different in a decade due to the evolving expectations of the role. As the requirements move away from “management” to one of engagement with teaching and learning, the superintendent anticipates we will see more women in educational leadership. In both social expectations of silence and hard work, superintendent 11 ensures that her perception as an appropriately tough leader is likewise balanced with an appropriately feminine approach. Leveraging these feminine qualities then allows her access and ability to remain in the superintendent club.

A final social expectation superintendent 11 engages in to appear appropriately feminine within her community includes her behavior in public settings outside of the workday. As an insider, the superintendent understands social expectations of women’s behavior and ensures she follows these expectations to balance her characterization as appropriately tough yet appropriately feminine in her leadership. She provided an illustration of this understanding by describing her behavior at a recent weekend community event:

But [becoming the superintendent] does change things. We went to…you know becoming a superintendent I’ve changed some things socially. Again, I think you just have to know who…your community. And you have to know…your board, your surroundings. [For example] people don’t want me to go to a brewery in [this county.] No one’s ever told me that and they don’t have to tell me that. Like I know that…. You know we went to a big musical festival thing [the other] night. And you know I’m tellin’ my husband let’s just get somewhere and sit down.
And I wanted to drink a beer and I did but I wasn’t walkin’ around with one. That would be worse for me as a female than a male. That would be worse in [this county.] But I don’t think it would have mattered in [other county] and it wouldn’t matter in [other county.] But you have to know that. And see that’s where some people male or female miss it…. People would use that. The first person that gets mad at me would say, “Well what kind of example is this?” Even though there’s nothing to it and I wasn’t driving…. I pick and choose…I think it all comes down to balance. You know I’m 21. I’m responsible.

There are unspoken rules around appropriate femininity in her community superintendent 11 understands. As she explains, because of her visibility as superintendent in her community she has “changed things socially.” At the event she attended, she wanted to drink a beer and felt culturally as a female superintendent, she could drink a beer but it had to be done in an appropriately feminine way. By finding a seat and sitting down, by hiding herself as she drinks beer, she is engaging in approved social norms for her gender. She admits if she were to walk around with a beer for others to see her, this would be “worse for [her] as a female than a male.” To do so would be to draw attention to a behavior that is only socially appropriate for a male; for a female to walk around with a beer, she would appear to be irresponsible, even if she is well above the legal drinking age. The superintendent understands this social norm for women is a part of the fabric of her community. As an insider in the community, she does not need to be told the rules for appropriate femininity. Additionally, she ensures she abides by such rules so that any breach of the social norms for women are not used against her when someone inevitably becomes upset with a decision she has made as a superintendent. Through her ability to acknowledge gender norms in her community and also ensure she is appropriately tough yet
appropriately feminine in her approach and behaviors, superintendent 11 works as an insider in her role in her community and makes meaning of her female leadership.

**Superintendent 12 – You Have Got to Force Yourself At the Table.**

Throughout her leadership experiences, Superintendent 12 has consistently demonstrated her dedication to ensuring all students receive an excellent education. Regardless of her own or her students’ circumstances, she has modeled determination and focus on the mission of the various school districts she has served. In narrating her leadership story, superintendent 12 provided a myriad of examples in which she has been treated unfairly or differently than other leaders because she is an African American woman. Despite the challenges of this discrimination, superintendent 12 illustrates her responses to circumstances in such a way that demonstrates her sense of duty to a cause more powerful than worrying about the way some people may view or treat her. In particular, throughout the narration of her leadership story, the superintendent used a narrative strategy of duty expressed in two critical ways. By being comfortable in who she is and by being brave even when she is uncomfortable, the superintendent navigates the complexities of sexism, racism, and politics and makes meaning of her leadership.

**You Don’t Want Them to Think That You Are a B.**

One way in which superintendent 12 illustrates her narrative strategy of duty is through the comfort she feels in her identity. As an African American female in a political position of power, she faces issues of sexism and racism daily. Early in the interview, the superintendent explained that when she reflects on gender issues she has experienced in her career, it is “hard” for her to “separate” her “race” from those considerations. Recognizing the intersectionality of her gender and race and its impact on her leadership experiences has provided superintendent 12
the wisdom to be comfortable in her identity. Through this comfort, she can recognize issues of sexism and racism and instead focus on the obligation she feels to the students in her district.

At the beginning of the interview, superintendent 12 explained one of the difficulties in female leadership is the “assumptions” made about her abilities to do the work. She has encountered times in her leadership when critics will have had no interaction or relationship with her yet they make assumptions about her decision making because of her gender and race. She illustrated an example of such assumption when she was giving a speech during an event:

…in [specific school system] one of the things that stands out to me the most that I will never forget: is someone asking for my resume and qualifications, while I was standing at the podium...delivering a speech. Um, and so…for whatever reason that would have been asked, I know that wouldn’t have been asked if I’m a white male. That’s what I do know. And so, what are the other reasons they did ask that question? I, um, I try not to attach it to reasons of race or reasons of gender… but it’s hard not to when I’ve been in this business for twenty years and know that none of my other superintendents would have ever been asked that question.

In this anecdote, there is a public expression of a private assumption about the superintendent’s leadership. As she explained, because of her gender and race, she feels as she encounters critics who doubt if she is actually qualified for the role of superintendent. The superintendent expresses her disgust at being asked for her resume in the middle of a speech and acknowledges that no male superintendent she knows would be publicly confronted with the same assumption that he is not qualified for the position he holds.

In addition to the sexist and racist assumption that superintendent 12, an African American woman, is not qualified for her job, the superintendent recognized how small but significant concerns with her appearance likewise challenged her leadership. She described how these seemingly trivial considerations have impacted her leadership identity:
I think…the other is people making comments, Like, um: “You know you’ve got to make sure you wear a soft color. You don’t want them to think that you are a B…."
I think, when it comes to things like attire. Um, like, you know, in my…
In my beginning I was very careful about what I wore: pants suits, skirts, dress, that kind of thing. I have since kind of just let that go. But I think I was very aware of it, because I received some advice from a male superintendent right at the beginning…
[He] said things like, “You need to wear pink or light blue. You need to, you know, soften your tone a little bit.”
And I…I really lis- I valued that, you know, person’s opinion… and I really listened.
I have since in the last five years decided that, um, you know that’s just not so important. And maybe I’m not in the right place if someone perceives something because I wore sandals that day.
Like…that’s just kind of silly. And I’m going to always be professional, but I think that there are times where if I want my fingernails to be white, I’m gonna paint them white. And people are just gonna have to shake it off…

Here the superintendent encounters two issues involving her appearance. First, she is instructed to wear “soft colors” to not appear “intense.” The rationale is these soft colors will keep her from being perceived as a bitch. Again, the superintendent is faced with the dilemma of an unwarranted assumption about her gender and race: the simple colors of her clothing will determine if she is intense and therefore labeled a bitch or not, all without any relationship or even exchange of information. Second, the superintendent acknowledges she was careful of her attire early on in her career because she wanted to feel respected for the professionalism of her appearance. After receiving advice from a male superintendent she admired, she worked to incorporate his advice to soften her appearance. After years of work in leadership, however, she realized she needed to be herself in the role, and that included in the way she dressed for her job. She recognized her clothing choices did not make her professional; she was already professional.
Her focus instead is on the quality of her work for the students of her district, and she does not worry about critics concerned with such silly matters. The superintendent leverages her narrative strategy of duty to her work to have confidence in the face of discrimination.

Along with assumptions about her qualifications and professionalism due to her gender and race, superintendent 12 likewise faces assumptions about her intensity because she is an African American woman in leadership. While she narrated her leadership story, she explained how she has encountered people throughout her “entire career” who give her what they perceive to be friendly advice when they tell her to not appear to be mean. She illustrated this assumption through an anecdote about a recent comment she received from an important politician in her community:

You know… I had a[n important politician] recently say to me that:
“You need to…”
Um, “you really probably need to give into this thing so you can build some goodwill with some of these teachers.”
And I was like, even though it’s not the right decision?
Like, I’m not sure I understand what that means.
There’s always a little bit of the air of:
I need to be nice or friendlier without really saying those words.
When I’m certainly not a mean person, like, that is just…
I think I know it sounds different when it comes from a woman.
So then there’s this assumption that somehow I’m just not being nice.
And so I’ve had conversations with [specific politicians,] with community members that “no” doesn’t mean I’m not being nice or that I’m not listening.
It’s just the answer….

The important politician in her community confronts her about “giving in” to something teachers within her district want done. He suggests doing so will create “goodwill” in her relationships with the adults. In a way, the politician is confronting her about what he perceives is her decision to appear tough. The superintendent understands the politician’s comments were masked and actually intended to tell her to be “nice or friendlier” without such directness. Superintendent 12 publicly acknowledges with the politicians and community members she works alongside and
explains a response of “no” does not suggest she is being mean or not listening to her stakeholders. By doing so, the superintendent is acknowledging the assumptions made about the intensity they stereotype her for because she is an African American woman. When the researcher asked the superintendent how her male employees perceived her, she had a similar explanation about the stereotype that she is angry and mean:

I’ve heard my entire career…
I don’t know why because I think I’m such a nice person!
(Laughing.)
I think my entire career the feedback I’ve received from like random situations is that people are scared of me.
Um, I think part of that is that I’m a Black female.
And it’s so weird because I’ve really tried to reflect and reflect:
What is that?
What am I giving off that makes people scared?
…it’s not even in my personality so it can’t be…
I’m the one that’s usually disruptive on the other side!
Like I’m laughing, talkin’ loud and people…I’m that one!
So for people to say that are people are afraid of me is interesting and I think that it is an external thing because it’s not even in my heart.
But I also will tell you that [my employees] know I’m passionate about kids and if I am gonna get upset it’s about we’re not doing something right by children.
I’m super passionate about that and I have extremely high expectations for myself and others.
I think that in every district that’s what you would hear.
I’m a task master and that I am a strategic thinker.
So once we determine what we need to do and what we need to get done we need to get it done.
I am there to support.
I am a cheerleader even in the job and that I’ll provide you any support to get the mission done.

Superintendent 12 describes her true demeanor as friendly and gregarious; however, she is not provided the benefit of that personality in her career as a leader. Instead, she has been told throughout her career people are scared of her. When she reflects on why that may be the perception of her, she can only point to it being an “external thing”: the stereotype of her as an angry African American woman. She finds solace in knowing such stereotypes are not in her
“heart” and they do not reflect her true identify. Instead, she allows the comfort of knowing her true identify to ensure she has high expectations for herself and others. In holding these high expectations, she ensures the focus on her work is steadily kept on the mission of the school district. Her narrative strategy of duty to her students is again demonstrated through reliance on knowing herself despite stereotypes that attempt to diminish her ability to lead.

As she considers her interactions with men in the workplace, superintendent 12 sadly recognizes she has been subjected to sexism in various forms in her role in leadership. This sexism primarily manifests in differential treatment from her male employees and also in inappropriate comments from men. When the researcher asked if she had ever dealt with male employees who did not take her as seriously as they would have if she were a male superintendent, she explained how this was a common issue:

[Researcher]: Have you ever supervised a male, in particular, who maybe you felt didn’t take you as seriously as they would have a male?

[Participant]: Yes. (Sighs.) Yes…every job. (Laughing.) Pick one!

[Researcher]: How? Why? Was there anything in particular? What did that look like?

[Participant]: I think it looks like…
“She said it but I’m just gonna do it my way and see if she says anything.”
Um and I’ve had many times that I have to call them back in and say…
“Look, when I asked you to do this, like, I was pretending…I wasn’t playin’.
Like, I wanted you to do it…I needed you to actually do it.”
Um and I can say that I’ve had to say that in every leadership position to a gentleman at some point.

[Researcher]: And do you think that that is specifically because you’re a woman? Or do you think that’s just the nature of the job?

[Participant]: Umm….it could be any of those things.
It’s kind of hard to pin point.
But I do think there’s this element of,
“I’m going to do it my way because she can’t tell me what to do,”
Power, kind of thing that happens.
Umm…and of course no one is going to come out and say, “I’m not gonna do that because she told me to do it.” But I think there are…first I’ve not had that interaction with a female. That I have supervised. And if they didn’t agree, typically we could get to some common ground of what we could do next, right? And…they talk bad about us not wanting to listen and those kinds of things but I’ve not had that kind of interaction with females. I’ve had that passive aggressiveness from some male employees on a number of occasions. So maybe it’s just what happens. Maybe it’s because I’m a woman. I don’t know. It typically looks like: I hear you but I’m going to do what I want to do anyway.

When the superintendent responds to the researcher’s question about men she has supervised treating her differently because she is a female, she confirms this to be the case and then lets out a sigh, as if she has been worn down from this specific gender issue in her work as a female leader. In every job she has had, the superintendent has experienced what she describes as passive aggressive behavior from male employees. Instead of working through differences as she explains she has found women to do, she states some men express their disrespect for her by pretending to do work they are unwilling to do. Because of the confidence she has in her ability to lead, she confronts these issues directly by addressing the men who do not follow through on their work expectations. Regrettably, she has had to have these conversations in each of the roles she has had. In leveraging her confidence, she stays focused on the work that is most important: ensuring the students in her district receive an excellent education.

Alone with differentiated treatment from male employees throughout her career, superintendent 12 has dealt with sexism throughout her career. When the researcher asked her about these experiences, the superintendent gave an overview of these situations and how she has dealt with issues of sexism as a female leader:

[Researcher]: Have you experienced sexism or harassment in your career?
[Participant]: Yeah...yes. Yeah, lots....
it’s no different than any other career field.
So I think just as the gentlemen are trying to figure out how to work with us we
are trying to work with them so you know...
The...pat on the back that goes a little too low.
The inappropriate comments about what you’re wearing that day...
or what your legs look like that day.
Or you know those kinds of things happen all the time.
Happen all the time.
Again I don’t think it’s any different in education than it is in the business world.
I think when you’re the only [woman] in the room, that is tough.
Again I grew up in an environment of athletics my entire life.
Again I only had brothers growing up so I think for me I have a different type of
armor on.
And so locker room talk doesn’t shock me.
Um, we shouldn’t have to put up with it but I’m not shocked by it.
So I usually have some comment or response back that gets that to stop
immediately.

Throughout her career, superintendent 12 has often been the “only [woman] in the room.” This
scenario has exposed her to situations where she is treated inappropriately because she is female.
When she reflects on her career, she sadly recognizes she has experienced sexism frequently and
it “happen[s] all the time.” Because of this, she has learned to deal with these instances of sexism
by drawing on her upbringing as an athlete with brothers. She explains these experiences early in
life gave her the “armor” needed to combat this sexism in the workplace. Through her ability to
deal with rampant sexism, the superintendent can focus on her obligation to lead the district.

Throughout each of her experiences with sexism and racism, superintendent 12 has
leveraged the confidence she has in her identity to make meaning of her leadership. She
expressed this level of comfort by explaining how she has and will continue to approach every
job offer she has:

I am...very comfortable in my skin.
And I am, um, I have- I have...
I grew up with only brothers.
I was a little touch of Tom-boy from the beginning.
And so I- I just… I mean obviously I know there’s a difference, but I… I don’t… I am who I am. Every position I’ve interviewed for, you know, I try to make that point that: Don’t hire me if you, if you don’t want a Black female. Because that’s who I am and whatever comes with that in my personality.

Superintendent 12 beautifully expresses the comfort she has in her “skin.” As a woman having grown up a “little touch…Tom-boy” with brothers, she is not fearful of being surrounded by men in leadership. The solace she has in her identity is so established she addresses who she is directly with those hiring her. She respectfully but directly acknowledges: “if [they] don’t want a Black female” then they should not hire her. While such comfort established, she can move past the various issues of sexism and racism she regularly experiences and focus fully on the mission for which she has been hired. By leveraging this confidence, she illustrates her narrative strategy of duty and makes meaning of her leadership, even in the face of tremendous discrimination.

You Didn’t Play Golf With Someone To Get Into the Seat.

The second way in which superintendent 12 illustrates her narrative strategy of duty is through a bravery to persist in the political arena. The superintendent recognizes the critical role the school superintendency plays in local and state politics. She also recognizes that as an African American woman, the political realm does not welcome her. Understanding this complexity, superintendent 12 illustrated how she forces herself to be brave with political actors even when she is uncomfortable in such scenarios. Because engagement with politics is an essential aspect of the job, allowing the superintendent to advocate for the students in her district, she demonstrates the narrative strategy of duty. Such a narrative strategy then allows her to make meaning of her leadership as a female in male-dominated scenarios.
Part of the superintendent’s ability to navigate the male-dominated political arena comes from her understanding of how the current system functions. In this current system, women are not only greatly outnumbered but they are also treated as if they do not belong. The superintendent illustrated this literal exclusion from the table with an anecdote about a recent political event she attended:

[Participant]: Um, yeah…
I think um yes that’s true [that the politics are difficult for women to navigate.]
But I will tell you in a room this is the biggest thing:
When we have our legislative breakfast for the region all the superintendents in the region are in there and it’s me, a couple of other female superintendents, all male superintendents—mostly white…
and all the senators and House folks—mostly white males—in the room… um, it is like…(Laughs).
It is like we do not belong in the room.
You have got to force yourself at the table.

[Researcher]: You as a black woman don’t belong in the room?

[Participant]: Right. Or a woman!
And no one says that but it’s so obvious in the comfort level of what they want to talk about. They have…
it’s really obvious [the men] have really great relationships with each other.
You know I’ll step up in a conversation and begin to listen and maybe try to interject and there’s just a very different dynamic happening.
It’s a boys’ club.
Um at that point…
at that point you realize that the only way to kind of like get on level ground is to force it.
No one’s gonna come and talk to you.
No one’s going to ask you about your golf game.
No one’s gonna, you know, that’s just not gonna happen.
If I were to sit at the table and not get up and not mingle…
no one would come to me, like that.
It’s pretty obvious.
So I get up.
And put myself in conversations and answer questions and force it.

At the political meeting, the women superintendents are not just outnumbered, they are not welcomed. As she describes this political scene, she explains her engagement with the politics is
forced. Because she is not welcome at the literal breakfast table, she forces herself into the breakfast conversations and makes herself part of the figurative political table. When the researcher probes the reason for her denial at the table, the superintendent acknowledges she is unwelcomed as an African American female but that all of the female superintendents are excluded because of their gender. As the superintendent can clearly see the men have “great relationships” with one another, she understands the “boys’ club” is not going to invite her in; they are not going to include her in their “golf game,” their personal or professional conversations. Because of her sense of responsibility to the students in her district, the superintendent makes herself part of the conversations despite being excluded by the men. In doing so, she demonstrates strength even in her discomfort to engage in the politics of the superintendency.

Another way the superintendent finds the ability to navigate the difficulties of the political arena in the superintendency is by forming allies in the field. Important to this group of allies are her relationships with her male superintendent colleagues. Because she has honest, thoughtful relationships with these men, she is able to give and receive feedback about navigating a political arena dominated by men:

Obviously…my friend group is mostly male. My colleagues, because they are mostly male. And I am- just like in any other friend group or any other career- you kind of pick the folks that have kind of like thinking or similar thinking, so, um, our relationships are great. We…we kind of laugh sometimes, you know one’ll say something that he said and I’ll go, “Well, man, I…I couldn’t say that!” Or, you know, he’ll say, “You should just do duh-duh-duh-duh,” And I’ll be like, “You know I can’t. That’s not going to come across the same way if I say that!” You know, so there’s kind of those conversations, but, again, those folks are my friends so we talk loosely about…kind of the differences. But I think we have…we have good relationships…. You know, it’s the job.
You know it’s funny.
You start as a teacher and everybody is female in the building except like two people and then you end up going through the process and for me it was a high school principal…
And so you know it was like me and a bunch of guys.

The superintendent acknowledges her friend group in the superintendency is, by default, mostly men. Having been surrounded by men throughout her career after her years teaching, she is comfortable being with “a bunch of guys.” Accordingly, she has aligned herself with male colleagues who think and process their work in the same way she does. Through building strong relationships with these men, she is able to have open, honest conversations about how they can or cannot approach political situations in similar ways. The allies superintendent 12 has worked to include in her network help her have the ability to engage in and negotiate the political arena in the superintendency.

In addition to the male superintendent colleagues she aligns herself with, superintendent 12 has found allies in female politicians. Having a mutual understanding of the difficulties women face in a political arena filled with men, aligning herself to other women politicians has provided the superintendent an opportunity to form relationships that allow her to better navigate hegemony. She explained how these relationships have benefitted her:

I’ve been fortunate in working with some female politicians in [the] districts [I’ve worked in] that have helped me navigate [the political difficulties.]
So in [a former school district] I had a wonderful mentor senator who really kind of…
we were kind of sitting in the same boat, right?
So she was a female [politician] in this state dealing with some of the same things when she went to Raleigh.
So we became very close and…
we were able to navigate the man’s world together often times.
[In my current district] we have a similar…
we have a female senator as well so I’ve been very lucky in the political arena because I’ve had some other female, you know, colleagues that have helped.
In her current and former districts, the superintendent has benefited from female politicians who face the same difficulties she does. Because the female politicians she has met in both districts find themselves in male-dominated arenas just as the superintendent does, the women can bond and support one another in these political scenarios. Additionally, the superintendent leans on these women for support and advice which builds her level of comfort within the political realm. This comfort gives her the ability to work in and through political situations the superintendent often finds uncomfortable because she is unwelcomed. By aligning herself with other female political allies, she can focus on the political work required to advocate for her students.

Ultimately, superintendent 12 finds the strength to navigate the politics of the superintendency through the sense of responsibility she feels to the stakeholders in her district. She often feels discriminated against in political scenarios. While she does not condone the blatant exclusion against African American women in these situations, she does not allow such discrimination to keep her from fulfilling the obligation she has to advocate for the students of her district. When she reflects on where she gets the strength to be brave in the face of the tough politics of the superintendency, the superintendent explains her sentiments about duty:

[Researcher]: This may be a silly question, but how are you brave enough to [navigate the politics]?

[Participant]: (Laughs.)
I think it’s because it’s required.
I don’t know how much bravery I have.
But I do know it’s part of the job.
And I need to speak for our district and what is needed for our kids.
And if I’m not doing that I’m neglecting my job.
So I don’t see it as optional.
It is sometimes uncomfortable…um and…
um, I get this feeling sometimes…
I had this feeling yesterday…
of it feels disrespectful.
Like really disrespectful.
And that makes me mad inside.
I’m not a person that gets mad. So I just use that energy to get myself in a place where I have the ability to navigate that world. Cause you can’t be angry. It is what it is. And part of my job is to figure out how to navigate it. So…but yeah, it’s interesting. It feels disrespectful is what it feels like…. [The political arena is] just not where some of us are comfortable. I am not comfortable but I know it’s the right place for me. But the politics of it makes, changes the game, changes the job. When you get into this job to be an educator and you find yourself in a political arena, they feel like they fight against each other… every single day. And some people just don’t want that fight and I get it...

Superintendent 12 confesses the exclusive politics of educational leadership make her angry. She recognizes the discrimination exists in the politics and how unfair it is to female educators and to the students of their districts. The politics make her so mad, in fact, it causes her anger uncommon to her normal personality. Because she can recognize this anger, she channels the energy into helping her have the ability to “navigate that world” even though she is uncomfortable. Recognizing the political conversations and connections are part of the job, she finds the courage to do the work for the benefit of students. Throughout her leadership narrative, superintendent 12 illustrates how her sense of duty for the work allows her to make meaning of her leadership as a woman in a male-dominated profession. By being comfortable in who she is and through the bravery she shows even when she is uncomfortable, the superintendent is able to work through the difficulties of sexism, racism, and politics to ensure the students in her district receive an excellent education.

**Superintendent 13 – You Don’t Have to Hire Me. I Don’t Need a Job.**

Although Superintendent 13 has and continues to enjoy a successful career in education, she has experienced professional wounds that have deeply influenced her approach to leadership.
While she learned much about leadership from these difficulties, she ultimately learned about herself, and she allowed that learning to manifest in the form of advocacy for herself and female leadership. Throughout the narration of her leadership story, these lessons were illustrated through a narrative strategy in which the superintendent described her leadership as emboldened. These interactions with politics and sexism have allowed her to balance her dedication to ensuring students receive an excellent education while also ensuring she is an advocate for herself and female leadership.

You Can Take Me to Lunch.

Superintendent 13’s experiences with politics have developed her narrative strategy of emboldened female leadership. Having ascended to a school superintendency quickly, the superintendent describes she was ill prepared for the intensity of the political realm in which superintendents work. Additionally, the political climate in which she found herself was “isolated and homogenous”: one where being an insider and knowing the unspoken rules of the establishment are not just valued but critical to survival. As an outsider and with a commitment to ensuring ethical practices for the benefit of students, the superintendent quickly found herself in a community where she experienced difficulties. She described this political climate through the illustration of one of her first interactions with politics:

During [specific year] when the Republican revolution kind of happened, [a former important school system employee]… [back] when I first got appointed he sent me an email that said: “[The superintendent’s first name]…” and he didn’t know me from Adam, like we’d never met. “[Superintendent’s first name], um, if you’d like to know what it takes to run a high performing school system, you can take me to lunch.”
(Laughs.)
Needless to say, I didn’t respond to that email. I’m pretty bullheaded.
Um, and so that [former important school system employee was elected to a key political position] in 2010.
(Laughs.)

The superintendent’s immediate introduction to politics in the superintendency was one in which she is reminded of her perceived order as an outsider and a woman in the district and community. The former school system employee, a person with significant political and social capital, addresses the superintendent in the email by her first name, even though they have never met. By addressing the superintendent by her first name, the politician establishes a belittling tone, almost to suggest the superintendent is a little girl compared to his giant stature. The additional text of the email suggests the former employee believes he has the premiere knowledge on how to run a “high performing” system the new female superintendent, of course, does not have. Additionally, in his direction for her to invite him to lunch, he establishes himself as an authoritative figure to her, as if she is a child who would be so honored to be in his presence. Being “bullheaded” the superintendent refused to respond to the email; however, she explains approximately a year later, this former important school system employee was elected to a political position with which she had to frequently interact. While she disagrees with the form of expression used in the email, the superintendent acknowledged ignoring the email was a political mistake.

Unfortunately, this difficult political dynamic that introduced her superintendency was the beginning of a rocky time in her career. During a mid-term election, there was a significant movement in the superintendent’s community to change the school board. The superintendent described the difficulties of navigating the election campaign season while serving as the superintendent in the community:

But during the election which was…
you announce in February and then you don’t get…you don’t…the election doesn’t happen until November.
The whole summer was just nothing but trash in the paper.
About what was going wrong in [the school district.]
And how we were no longer high performing and just…
I mean crazy, crazy stuff.
So by the time that these folks got elected in November, I was done with them.

(Laughs.)
It was just a unique group of people.
Um and again, I mean I honestly say I made a mistake by not meeting with the former [important school system employee.]
At his request.
I’m a person that trains crucial conversations....
And the first thing I say when I train it is:
If you’re stuck personally or professionally it’s because of a conversation you are not having or one you’re not having well.
So, for me, it was both with him.

(Laughs.)
So they got elected.
And I think the second day after the election they handed me a list of 26 agenda items that they wanted a work session within about a week.
I think I produced about 1,000 pages of documentation.
And went through 26 items in a work session on the [specific date.]
After that the [former important school system employee] comes in and says, “Wow! I wish I would have gotten to know you beforehand.”

(Laughs.)
Something like that.

This illustration shows the difficulties the new superintendent faced as she attempted to lead the district while an intense election was happening simultaneously. As the superintendent describes, between the announcement of the candidates to run for political office in February and the election in November, the superintendent endured nine months of political bashing of her and the system in the media and community. The experience proved to be so intense that when the election was over and when the superintendent was then required to work with the candidates who were elected, she found it nearly impossible to work with them. By presenting her with a list of 26 agenda items the day after the election, the board was attempting to challenge her ability to lead the district. Surprisingly to the former school system employee who was now on the board, she was able to rise to their demands, providing a thousand pages of documentation of her and the district’s work. Reflecting on this time period of political difficulty, the superintendent understands the conversation she elected not to engage in with the important political figure.
likely produced some of the political angst against her and the system. Accordingly, when the superintendent, as a woman, did not respond to the male political figure’s proposal she take him out to lunch, she was then disciplined, publicly and personally. Not responding to his request was one component that led to the public shaming of her and the system to the point they were elected. Should she had taken on the role of little girl and complied with his demand for her to take him to lunch, the narrative may have been written differently.

While she reports she maneuvered some of the politics in her role with the new board to the benefit of her work and the students in the district, superintendent 13 admits the politics were so overwhelmingly she actively searched for alternative roles. This professional wound of her perceived failure of her first superintendency marked the beginning of her emboldened approach to female leadership. In reflecting on her first superintendency, superintendent 13 speaks to the intensity of the political realm on female superintendents and, in particular, the stereotypes they endure:

But I do think it’s harder on women to deal with the politics. Because we’re always having to answer for what I think are feminine characteristics… like whininess or nagging or those types of things. When men do the same things… they just don’t call it that, right? I mean its just asking for… it’s just advocating for your system or your principals or your staffs or whatever the case may be.

The superintendent explains the difficulties of battling stereotypes of women in politics. When men advocate for their systems, they are viewed as strong, supportive; however, when women engage in the same behavior, they are considered whiny, difficult. Not only did superintendent 13 experience these stereotypes of women as difficult to work with in her first superintendency, she likewise faced other painful stereotypes. During the summer in which the school board
election became contentious and she was featured in media reports, the superintendent explains her family was brought into these critiques:

[Participant]: Um but there were comments made [in the media] especially in relation to some personnel issues, that kind of got a little heated, where my child would be pulled into… you know comments. That was during the time when there was a lot of anonymous online comments. Newspapers didn’t force you to be not anonymous, and so it just there was some ugly stuff.

[Researcher]: What were the comments about?

[Participant]: There was one that included sexual assault on my child…. There were some teachers at her school that were not really positive to her. Um, it was….a really…yeah.

The superintendent illustrates a phenomenon specific to female leadership and the difficulty of navigating politics. When the superintendent was being subjected to media scrutiny, public commenters included her school-aged child in their criticism of the superintendent and the school system. Her child had nothing to do with her work or the work of the school system, yet the community finds it appropriate to include the child in their evaluation of the superintendent and district’s work. By involving the superintendent’s child in this public bashing, the community members are first attempting to emotionally hurt the superintendent. Second, the community members are commenting indirectly about their view of her role as mother and superintendent: should you, as a woman, choose to work outside the home, you then subject your child to the standard of work the community expects of you. If that standard is not satisfactory, not only should the superintendent suffer, but so should her child.

Between the difficulties of the political climate, the recognition of the stereotypes placed on female leaders in their political work, and the subjection of her child to political criticism, superintendent 13’s view of female leadership began to shift towards a more emboldened
approach. With these experiences, she left her first superintendency role in search of a better work environment. A reflection of the political experiences of superintendent 13’s first superintendency provides context for two important effects on her work. First, the difficulties the superintendent faced seemed to do little with her actual work in the district and instead seemed to result almost entirely from her unwillingness to engage in a conversation with the important political figure early in her superintendency. This contextualizes how the success of a superintendent, especially for women, is often not about the work of educating students but much more often about the ability to navigate the political realm. Second, these experiences affected the superintendent’s understanding of her work as a female leader. The conflicts and negativity she faced gave her the wisdom to know the political context of the community greatly affects a female superintendent’s ability to lead. With this knowledge, the superintendent became more confident in her approach as she left the first superintendency, knowing her subsequent career moves needed to be more strategic. Although painful, the political experiences of her first superintendency taught her to be emboldened in her approach, both for herself and for advancing the work of female leadership.

**We Can’t Hire a Woman.**

In addition to politics, the superintendent’s experiences with sexism have developed her narrative strategy of emboldened female leadership. After her first superintendency, she moved through the process of trying to find another position. In her movement into a new superintendency, incidents with sexism strengthened her emboldened approach to ensuring a successful career for herself and other women leaders.

As the superintendent searched for a new school superintendency, encounters with sexism continued to affect the way she made meaning of female leadership. While working with
a district that was in search of a new superintendent, she was affected by a female board
member’s perception of the board’s need to secure a man for the position:

[Participant]: In fact, in [specific district I was working in,]
I mentioned that [specific person] was an interim and they were doing a search.
And I was not interested in the job there although it’s a great place.
They—one of the board members—said to me:
“We can’t hire a woman.”
I was thinking…
First of all, not legal.
Second of all…
and it was a woman who said it….a woman former principal.

[Researcher]: Wow. What did she mean by that?

[Participant]: I don’t…
I really don’t know from her why she believed that.
But it was…and it was pretty well known that the other board members and this
particular board members and maybe others felt that way.
I really…I can’t put my finger on that…
Except to say I think sometimes folks feel more comfortable.
I think sometimes as women we’re not as good to each other.
And so that might have been part of her reticence.
I don’t know.

This discriminatory comment from the female board member affected the superintendent and her
understanding of female leadership. First, it immediately set an expectation for her and other
women that they are not welcome. Specifically for superintendent 13, this board member makes
it clear—although the superintendent was not interested in this specific superintendency role—
she would never be considered as a candidate for the position and neither would any woman be
welcome to be superintendent in the district. Also, it provides further understanding for
superintendent 13 that this community’s exclusion of women is not unique, that there are other
communities in which she and other women will never be welcome to serve as their leader. As
the superintendent reflects on the female board member’s comment, she realizes there are
communities in which people will only be “comfortable” with male leaders. Accordingly, this
sexist comment continued to shape her understanding of her emboldened approach, ensuring her search for a superintendency considered how prospective communities view female leaders.

As superintendent 13 searched for a superintendency, considerations of the gender pay gap and relocation of residency for female leaders exposed additional barriers of sexism. The superintendent explained during her search, she was “picky” about potential opportunities, working to ensure she would not be underpaid for her role simply because she was a woman. She reflected in the interview on how sexism has affected women in education:

I think going back to the question about gender…
I mean we think about what the General Assembly has done with teacher pay over the last decade.
And you look at that pay scale and you compare 2008-2009 to 2018-2019.
And it’s a joke!
All they’ve done is just mess with the numbers in the middle!
And we’ve got the same 30 year number at the bottom…
Actually, $500 less now than we did 10 years ago.
And if this were a profession dominated by men,
I don’t think it would be that way.

In working through her experiences with sexism, the superintendent understands how gender issues affect women’s pay. As she considers the current political climate in NC, she explains how the state’s government has worked to create an illusion of increased pay for the education profession. The reality, however, is this political gameplay serves to benefit elected officials who tout claims of increased pay for educators while educators suffer. Considering this, the superintendent acknowledges this is a direct result of sexism: that a profession dominated by men would not experience the same issues with pay as a profession dominated by women does. In addition to how sexism affects the gender pay gap, superintendent 13 also described how sexism affected her experiences with her residency in her search for a superintendency:

The other thing I think about being a woman that’s been interesting especially as I searched for jobs…
you know I’m married…
so as a married woman it was almost like….
There’s tons of men in the state of North Carolina that are superintendents that do not live—that is statutorily established—in their districts. Now, they actually have some kind of residence there, but they don’t truly stay there. They’re driving back and forth from somewhere else because their wife has their family or works somewhere else. Like I had questions during my interview like: “Are you going to maintain a second house?” “Are you going to maintain your residency in [specific] county?” “Are you going to do this?” “You gonna do that?” And at some points I was like, until I can sell it! Um but the questions were not nearly as regular or as systematic for my male colleagues who were involved in searches at the same time. And that was based on my anecdotal conversations with it.

North Carolina General Statue 115C-272 requires school superintendents reside in the district in which they serve (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1955). Superintendent 13 describes during her interviews for a position, she was regularly questioned about her ability and level of commitment to move to the new district. This questioning not simply sought to inquire if she would move as is required by law, but questioned her intention to keep property in a different location. The purpose of this questioning by various boards in her search for a superintendency indicates the different expectations of women and the skepticism they have in their ability to move as easily as they perceive men can. First, it establishes an expectation women must only live in one district, while superintendent 13 acknowledges she knows many male superintendents whose families remain in other districts while they commute to their work district. Additionally, it establishes a sense of skepticism and, in turn, a barrier to women ascending into the superintendency in that board members doubt women’s abilities to move their families as easily as male superintendents can.

After securing a second superintendency, the superintendent reflects that while she was more confident in her approach, she continued to experience sexism as a female leader. The
difference in her second superintendency, however, was she was more prepared and willing to identify and disrupt the sexism as it occurred. When asked by the researcher if she had ever experienced sexism or harassment, the superintendent described sexism as “a daily thing.” Reflecting on what it means to experience daily sexism, the superintendent illustrated how expectations of female leaders establish it:

[Participant]: I mean I think that’s a daily thing. The sexism part....

to the point where I’ve said things in my current board meetings like, “Would you ask a male superintendent that?”....

I also think that there are demands placed on women that aren’t placed on men. You know, I still have to be a mom.

Um, and don’t get me wrong.

My husband does equal if not more work, especially when it came to raising my child, than I did. But I still felt an obligation to be an equal parent and to make sure I was spending time with my child and that kind of thing.

And you know I don’t think…

so folks, I think that my board had expectations of me being the mom and being the superintendent.

So um, I think that makes things harder. And I do think that board members put more demands on female superintendents.

[Researcher]: How so?

[Participant]: Like they…

I think they call me for stuff that I 100% know they would not have called my predecessor for.

[Researcher]: Like what?

[Participant]: Community complaints, or concerns… or some of its really nit-picky stuff.

Um and I again there have been stuff where I have said, “Would you have asked the previous superintendent this?” And sometimes they said, “Oh yeah yeah, we would.” And then one time I had a board member say, “Well probably not.” (laughs)

I said… just to be clear. Just to be clear.
The superintendent acknowledges how sexism sets expectations of female leaders that may not exist for men. One way in which this manifests is the unspoken expectations the board sets for the superintendent to be both full-time superintendent and full-time mom. She describes the difficulties of managing this expectation and how it makes her role as superintendent more complicated. Additionally, sexism occurs through greater demand placed on women, with more contact initiated by board members to her than was made to previous male superintendents in the district. Having experienced challenges in the superintendency before, superintendent 13 no longer allows such issues to go without challenge. When daily sexism occurs, she openly challenges comments even in public board meetings, questioning if such comments would be made of male superintendents. Likewise, when she believes contact from a board member is unnecessary, she directly asks if the request would have made of the previous male superintendent. In experiencing sexism in the superintendency, superintendent 13 has worked to identify and challenge such issues and, in turn, makes meaning of her leadership through an emboldened approach.

Superintendent 13 also experiences sexism in her interactions with male superintendent colleagues. While she gets along well with her male counterparts, she recognizes the differences in approach she and other women superintendents have compared to the men. She acknowledges that, of course, not all men can be categorized in the same way, but interactions with particular male colleagues have illustrated a narrative in which female superintendents generally have to work exponentially more than men to be viewed as credible. She explained this dynamic when the researcher asked her about her relationships with her male superintendent colleagues:

It depends on who they are.
I mean [there is one who I am friends with] who tells me I work too hard all the time.
(Laughs.)
And I don’t ever say to him, “Well you don’t ever work hard enough.”
Um and I like him don’t get me wrong. We have a good relationship. But I think there’s this feeling among the majority of male superintendents that female superintendents are too micromanaging. Or get too deep in the weeds or… which may be true. Um I just feel a real responsibility and obligation to every student in my district. And when I know something’s not going the way it should, I also feel an obligation to the taxpayers that the money we’re spending is being spent appropriately. And I can defend every dollar because Lord knows if someone’s going to have to defend it it’s going to have to be me.

When the researcher asked about her relationship with male superintendent colleagues, the superintendent chose to respond by describing a professional relationship in which a male superintendent belittles her work. By telling her she “works too hard” he is judging her ability to manage the responsibility of the job in a way that he finds acceptable. The reality, to superintendent 13, is this male superintendent is simply not working hard enough yet manages to keep his position. She continues to describe how women superintendents are additionally stereotyped for their work ethic. In working hard for their districts, women are labeled as “micromanaging,” illustrating how the men attempt to demean their hard work by criticizing it. The superintendent, however, acknowledges this sexist perspective and instead chooses to accept such criticism, as she is willing to do so to ensure she can answer to her constituents about the work she is doing. Throughout her experiences with sexism in a variety of leadership positions, the superintendent has developed an approach that allows her to identify, acknowledge, and deal with such discrimination.

**Crap or Get Off the Pot.**

These complicated experiences with politics and sexism have led superintendent 13 to make meaning of her leadership through a narrative strategy of emboldened leadership. As she
narrated and reflected on her leadership story in the interview, she described how her own perceived failures in her first superintendency led to a time of professional grief. In considering this grief, she described how it affected her as a female leader:

[After the mid-term election in my first superintendency] I had already made up my mind I was applying elsewhere.
And so I left.
I announced in [specific month] that I was going to go work for [specific organization].
I worked for them for [specific number of] years in [specific leadership role] which I absolutely loved….
And I had…
I really had a…
in a lot of ways a mourning period for that experience.
Because you know I had never had…
I was, you know a…
I was 30 years old when I was assigned to be a principal.
I was always successful.
And I never had…
you know, nothing was ever a struggle.
Nothing was ever a challenge for me.
So not that I was asked to leave or anything like that, but I mean I saw it personally as a failure.

This self-described “mourning period” was a pivotal moment in the superintendent’s professional life. Having always found professional success, the superintendent’s perceived failures in the work of her first superintendency caused her great pain. In this narrative, an examination of her broken sentences reflect the self-doubt and grief the superintendent must have felt in choosing to leave a difficult first superintendency. This movement away from her first superintendency allowed her the time and space to not only emotionally recover from such pain but also prepare herself for a more emboldened approach to another attempt at the school superintendency.

Once the superintendent felt she was prepared to search for another superintendency, she allowed the lessons learned from the difficulties of her first superintendency to inform her
second approach. As she reflected on this search, she explained how it affected her and how she allowed herself to be more selective about considering a new position:

And so I got really picky.
To the point where the [specific association,] the representative that works with them said:
“Look you’re going to have to crap or get off the pot.
If you don’t take one of these positions,
I can’t promise you that I can keep telling boards that you should be someone who they should consider.”
And I said,
“Well, I’m going to be honest with you…
I’m not going to take just any kind of pay.
And I’m not going to take just any kind of living arrangements.”

As she considers the approach she took to finding a second school superintendency, superintendent 13 describes her behavior as “picky.” Her selection was so slow, in fact, the representative of the organization she worked with explained if she continued such behavior they may be unable to continue to represent her work. When she describes exactly what she considered she was “picky” about, she explained she was unwilling to consider what she perceived to be poor pay and inadequate living arrangements. Considerations of these reasonable aspects of her search, however, show the superintendent was not necessarily being “picky,” as she describes; rather, she was demanding the level of respect she deserved. This demand for respectful working conditions such as appropriate pay and living arrangements illustrates how her experiences with difficulties in female leadership led her to an emboldened approach: an approach in which she is advocating appropriately for herself and for all female leadership.

The superintendent’s narrative strategy of emboldened leadership continued in her demand for equal working conditions as she was offered new superintendent positions. She provided an anecdote about this approach to the researcher about negotiating terms of a new superintendent position:
So I was in the middle of negotiating, this was in [specific year,] in the spring. I was in the middle of negotiating with one county… and they got real freaky. There was not one hotel in the entire county. There was a motel in the county. And I said to them: “Look I’m going to move here but I’m not, until I can find a house, I am going to stay in a hotel in an adjacent county.” “No, no, no. You have got to live here. You’ve got to move here. And if you’re going to stay in a hotel, you’re going to have to stay here.” And I was like, “I’m not doing it. Have you been there? Will you stay there?” “No” “Well I’m not staying there either.” So I put them on hold. And I said, “Look, I’ve got another interview. I’m going to go to this interview.”

The superintendent is so insistent on being treated at her worth she is willing to lose a secured job offer. As she is negotiating the position offer, she challenges the board, flipping their demands back on them. When she asks if they have or would ever stay in the location they are requiring her to stay, they respond they would not. She confirms she will not do so, either. In such negotiation, she publicly identifies the inequity in their request, cementing her new approach as an emboldened leader. Likewise, she establishes her value and makes meaning of her leadership. Even as she moved into an interview for a district she was particularly interested in, she ensured she communicated to the team securing the job was not a necessity for her. She explained how she approached the interview with this mindset:

And um I went into the interview… Um and I basically told them:
“Look, you don’t have to hire me.
I don’t need a job.”
It was the same kind of thing.
But my [specific previous work] experience and what they were going through,
they had had a significant amount of challenge with their commissioners,
was very attractive to them at that time….
And so I got appointed to be the superintendent.

While telling an interview team you do not need the job may appear flippant, the superintendent’s approach is calculated. By explaining she does not need the job, she communicates two points. First, she appears unflappable, that she will not be a woman who accepts any kind of terms in negotiation. Second, she communicates her worth, that she is not a woman desperately seeking a leadership position simply for a title. This approach allowed her experience to speak for her, and it was successful in helping her secure a good fit for her leadership. Through her experiences with difficult politics and sexism, superintendent 13 developed an emboldened approach and allowing her to make meaning of her female leadership.

**Superintendent 14 – Women Want to Be All In**

Superintendent 14 has enjoyed a long, successful career in education. Having worked in virtually every position within a school district, she deeply understands the complexities of educational systems due to her myriad of direct experiences engaged in the work. When listening to superintendent 14 describe her leadership story in detail, one can hear the commitment and love she feels towards educating society’s children, especially those most marginalized in our communities. As she dictated her story, the superintendent’s narrative strategy of being all in was evident throughout even the most insignificant of details. Her narrative strategy was developed through her sense of accountability, her tireless dedication, and her ability to adapt to gender issues in the role of superintendent. Through this narrative strategy and its evidence throughout her work, superintendent 14 makes meaning of her leadership.
I’m Feeling It. I am Feeling It.

One way superintendent 14’s narrative strategy of being all in is developed throughout her leadership story is through accountability. Throughout her long career in education, the superintendent has felt a tremendous responsibility to her work, regardless of her role or to whom she reported. The superintendent illustrated how this level of personal responsibility developed early on in her career when she served as a principal:

We are in a glass house.
We are in a glass house.
But I think it’s just knowing that those twists and turns, and how those things occur and how that impacts, um, your decisions and how you work with people, and I think knowing…
I truly believe that all the different experiences and the accountability I’ve had. I truly believe because of being an elementary, middle and high school principal and being truly accountable.
Because by the time I was at [specific school,]
the superintendent basically said at that time, the, um, AYP was the, um, was the goal.
And also SAT and everything else, you know, for [specific] school.
But you, and, um, and he basically told, you know, a couple people, he told all the [specific level] school principals:
“If you don’t make AYP, you’re probably not going to be at your school next year.”
You think about the accountability and…
and when you love something as much as you love your school, you really…
It’s all hands on deck.
And you really do whatever it takes.
And you truly do love your school and so I think it’s just knowing.
I think having all those experiences with tons of accountability.

Her experiences in the principalship, especially at a young age, exposed her to the intensity of accountability in the role of educational leadership. She understands in these roles, leaders are in “glass house[s].” These leaders are exposed to intense scrutiny which often manifests as high accountability for testing results. The illustration of her superintendent telling her and other principals that if they did not meet accountability measurements they would be moved to a
different position shows the level of personal responsibility the superintendent placed on herself. Instead of scoffing at the superintendent’s directive, she instead confesses how much she “love[d]” her school, and how that love drove her to get “all hands on deck” to ensure they did “whatever” it took to produce such achievement outcomes. It was these types of high pressure, high accountability experiences in her career led to her narrative strategy of being all in and have helped her make meaning of her leadership.

The superintendent experienced similar pressures for accountability in a subsequent central office leadership role. In this role, she was responsible for a large number of schools within the district, including all of these schools’ operations and management. While she acknowledges this role was intense and difficult, she likewise describes the leadership lessons she learned from the level of accountability she felt in the role:

When I was in, um, as [specific central office leadership role] in [specific district,] it was the first year of the regional, uh, model. And the superintendent was a non-traditional superintendent. He was a [specific role] by trade and so he really did completely count on us. I mean we were completely the folks who were accountable for those schools. I mean, you know, and… and, and…so just working with people and having those experiences. I really do think it helps our students because we are all in. And, um, sometimes when you think about watching administrators through the years, I think one of the biggest differences when you look at someone and it’s about their, um, about really, um, the prestige that may go along with something. Um, that it’s. It’s really about being all in. And really not giving up on students. Not giving up on adults. Just not giving up and always trying to… to find: ok what’s the next solution?

In this new role, the superintendent had high accountability from her superintendent, who relied on her to ensure school operations were effectively managed. As she reflects on the necessity of this role where she was in charge of all aspects of their management, she considers the value to
students of administrators being all in their work. In contrast, she considers administrators who
engage in the leadership roles for “prestige” or glory and how that mentality runs counter to her
work and counter to what students need. As she explains, being all in means not giving up on
people and working to continuously improve. These lessons taught her the value of
accountability in her work and allows her to make meaning of her purpose as an educational
leader.

In addition to the accountability superintendent 14 feels to overall school test scores and
to the requirements from her supervisors, the superintendent also places accountability on herself
to ensure students have an excellent education. In particular, she feels a great sense of personal
responsibility in ensuring students who are marginalized are able to benefit from the school
systems in which she has worked. She illustrated this accountability through an anecdote about
one of her current students:

One of my top students,
she is a rising [specific grade.]  
She’s in [specific school.]  
She’s taken, uh, she’s just finishing her traditional [specific grade] grade year,
but she already has thirteen high school credits so she can take classes at the
community college.
Her dad washes dishes.
He’s not documented.
And her mom is not documented,
and her mom keeps children in her home and they live in an unairconditioned
apartment in town.
And she’s one of my top and one of my favorite children.
And…and so I think it is just knowing for my children they see…
they know the value of education.
And I think the experiences I’ve had along the way have helped me to stay
accountable to my students.

The superintendent describes how one of her best students is also one of her favorite students. To
this student, whose parents are undocumented and who receive little pay in their jobs, the
superintendent feels a deep sense of commitment in ensuring she has opportunity and likewise
values these educational opportunities. Simultaneously, the superintendent describes how her experiences in educational leadership have kept her feeling accountable to students to continue to ensure they receive an excellent education.

While the superintendent describes her sense of accountability as an overall positive aspect of her approach to leadership, she understands with such a tremendous sense of personal accountability comes the weight of the role. As she considers how she guides students’ parents and her staff through difficult circumstances, she describes how her accountability to the work often results in her taking on the emotional burdens of others:

I have found that when I’m talking with a parent, and I’m telling them some really bad things… I had a child that died in a third period class and he was not pronounced dead until, um, he was at the hospital. But he just had an aneurysm in a math class. Talking with those families about really difficult things, and that when I am talking with a family, and I’m telling them that their child really just made a major mistake. And here is a major consequence. I found through the years that the pain I had was very similar to the pain I had when my own biologically linked children made a mistake. So it was like I had so much empathy that I… I would tell them and I would do what I needed to do and… tough, uh, because you need to have the consequences or you’ll continue to do some type of inappropriate behavior if there’s not an appropriate consequence. I found I’m the same way now with my principals. That if my principal calls and it is a terrible, terrible situation, it’s like when they’re talking I’m feeling it. I am feeling it. I…I… I completely understand what they are saying. And I can see how awful this is and if at all possible I try to go right there with them. I find that when my principals have a problem I feel whatever they’re working with. So when they’re explaining it to me I’m processing it with them. And typically they resolve their own problems by talking through it. They can hear themselves and they can hear the solutions, and I… I do think, um, that is an advantage. I think it hurts and I think it takes a toll. But I do think it helps me to continue to be all in.

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And to continue to see how difficult it is to be a principal and how much accountability it is.
And how many tough decisions a principal needs to make.
And how they deal with difficult people,
they deal with difficult employees,
they deal with difficult sometimes children when they are not at their best,
they deal with difficult coaches.
You know they deal with a lot.
And I think I’ve paid more attention of that through the years.
And I wonder if that’s a gender difference.
I don’t know, but I do…
I do feel when they’re having a tough time I am…
I am completely right there with them, which, you know, sometimes its like:
Oh my goodness we, we…
and we get through it.

As the superintendent considers how she guides parents and principals through the difficulties of their lives and their work, her description is almost like a confessional, a stream-of-consciousness of the weight she has felt from years of helping adults. She admits the level of accountability she feels to these adults is often painful, because when she works with them on complex issues, she is often there with them, literally and emotionally. She understands this emotional investment in which she carries their grief and burdens takes “a toll” on her; however, she likewise recognizes such accountability is critical to her desire to “continue to be all in.” By the end of this narration, it is as if the superintendent is reliving some of this pain, thinking about how she and the adults got through it. This level of accountability to the stakeholders in her district allows her to be completely invested in the work and allows her to make meaning of her leadership.

The greatest accountability superintendent 14 feels in her career is the accountability she feels as a mother to her own children. Having become a principal at a young age while she was also a graduate student and a mother to two young children, the superintendent acknowledges the complexities of the relationship between motherhood and the superintendency. When asked
about this relationship, she again articulated how accountability was foundational to her work as both superintendent and mother:

I think, um, I was very concerned that, um, they w…
that they never saw me as someone who would…
um, allow someone to mistreat me.
So, um, I wanted them to always make good choices about the type of people that they spent time with, etc.
So, I saw my role as, um, to be a model of:
You work hard, you do your very best, you’re kind to people, you are…
you try to be a good person.
And that you ne…
that they are always watching.
So I…
I think it’s knowing that your children are always watching what you do if not more than what you say….
So, um, and I do believe the female role models that I have had have been extremely strong and they were, um…
They were people who were always putting everybody’s else needs before their own.
And I did see that as something that being a female I didn’t have the luxury of putting my needs first.
So, I think that it is really just knowing that, um, you’re constantly making choices.
And, uh, and always analyzing is it worth it?
And are you modeling hard work and trying to do the right things.
And your children how they see that.

The superintendent wanted to protect her children from seeing any public scrutiny she may have faced in her superintendency. More importantly, though, she felt accountability to being a good role model for her children. Accordingly, she ensured she was always modeling hard work and strong character for them to see, just as the female role models she had had done for her. She recognized the intensity of this accountability towards serving as a role model to her children often forced her to put her needs second. She explained she was constantly analyzing this dynamic, considering if the hard work was “worth it.” Although she faced this inner self-doubt, she continued to model for her children hard work because of the level of personal responsibility she felt towards them and the duty of her role as superintendent. As she considers the level of
accountability she has felt throughout her career to student achievement outcomes, her bosses, stakeholders, students, and children, superintendent 14 illustrates how her narrative strategy of being all in has development and allowed her to make meaning of her leadership.

**I Attend Every One of Their Meetings.**

In addition to accountability, superintendent 14’s narrative strategy of being all in is developed through the dedication she demonstrates to her work. Likely a direct result of the level of personal responsibility the superintendent places on herself, her work life has been marked by a high attention to detail and focus. Admitting she requires herself to work “twice as hard” as others, she recognizes part of her career success has resulted from tireless hours spent on visibility and dedication to her roles in education. She illustrated how being all in through hard work has been a characteristic of her life since the beginning of her career:

I was always in school and always working full-time. So, because I honestly felt like I loved going to school, and I always felt like I needed a better balance between a practitioner’s work and the scholarly work, and that I needed that combination to work together.

I also have two [children] and one…was born when I was working on my degree at [specific school.] And then the second [child] was born while I was working on, uh, my doctoral work at [specific school,] and so my youngest was three when, um, I completed that degree.

So they were always with me. And the easy part about that was that because I always worked and was always in school, no one expected anything different of me. So it was always normal that I didn’t go to the movies or I didn’t go ice skating or I didn’t do all those types of things. I always was working or going to school. And then as my children, um, ah, started doing activities, I was doing their activities, too. And they were in all of my schools. So they’re four years different in their age, and the youngest one, when I became an elementary principal, the youngest one was two weeks old.
So, and the older one was getting…was in pre-school, so when she entered school, I was the principal there. And so, her first experience was that mom was there. Then when I, um, started at the middle school I was there a little before her and then she came…attended the same middle school. And then, the younger one was at the elementary school I left, and so we did that all the way through [specific secondary school.]

As soon as her career in education started, superintendent 14 has been all in through her hard work and dedication to students. Early on in her career, the superintendent describes how working full-time and being a student earning graduate degrees was beneficial to her work as an educator, allowing her to marry theory and practice. Additionally, she describes how such immersion in her work normalized the intensity of her work: her young children did not know a mother who behaved any differently than to work all the time. While she recognizes she and her children were unable to engage in the normal activities most young mothers and children do, she leveraged her work as an educator to envelope her children in the schools she led, having them do activities and attend the schools where she worked as principal. Importantly, the superintendent’s description of this extremely busy time in her life is not marked by resentment; rather, her description notes how constant dedication to her work and bringing her young children alongside her were normal requirements of the role of educational leader. This description of her entry into the profession marks how a high level of dedication to the field developed her narrative strategy of being all in.

Unsurprisingly, this level of hard work and dedication did not end after the first years of her entry into the role of school leader. Throughout her tenure as an educator, superintendent 14 has tirelessly poured herself into the work. When she first began her superintendency, she explained her employees were at first confused by the level of dedication she committed to visibility in the schools of the district:
In the beginning when I first arrived, the staff here thought I was gone too much from this office. And...and it was like, “What do you mean?” And [they] said, “We’re always in the school.” And I said, “Well, that’s where our children are.” And so, my perspective is that I need to be with people. And I need to be with trench... I need to be in the trenches. And I have always been a person whether I was elementary, middle, or high school principal or [high ranking central office position] is that I needed to see things. And I needed to coach, and I needed to be out there to understand the nuances, and I’ve always been a person that dealt with people during the day and paperwork at night. So, I would come back but I would be here at night to work with paperwork.

When she arrived at the superintendency, the central office norm was for the superintendent to be physically present in the central office building each day. With a focus on students and schools, the superintendent began to break that norm by modeling the importance of visibility within their school buildings. The superintendent describes the importance of being with students, teachers, and leaders to see, coach, and understand the system. This level of dedication to high visibility in the schools, however, places burden on the superintendent to extend her work day, and she recognizes such inculcation into the schools stretched her paperwork into the night. She explains this leadership approach in her current district has been fruitful, with all of the schools in her district last year meeting or exceeding growth measures. As her emphasis on visibility within the school day for educators is a foundational part of her work, superintendent 14 illustrates her dedication to the role by effectively doubling the length of each work day. It demonstrates her desire to be all in.

Recognizing the difficulties often associated with working with politicians, superintendent 14 also demonstrates her narrative strategy of being all in through tireless dedication to ensuring positive political relationships. As a female superintendent in her current
district, she works with a set of local politicians who are all white men. Because she understands the success of her school system is connected to her ability to build and maintain relationship with these men, she works hard to nurture and grow these connections, spending countless hours to do so. When the researcher asked about her relationships with these politicians, the superintendent described her approach to the work:

I try to study, um…
our, uh, [specific local political group] are all male, all white male, all white males.
And our [specific local politician is] a white male.
And the [specific local county staff] is a white male.
So I attend every one of their meetings…
But I attend every one of their meetings so that I can hear people from the audience and how they respond.
And I hear the conversations about…between one another.
And I’m constantly trying to learn about what’s important to them.
And one of the things that I found was sometimes I have to have another mediator.
I have to get the information from another male that they have a relationship with.
And figuring out how to do that.
So that we take care of our schools and, um…
So it is a lot.
It is a lot of strange things sometimes.
But one of the things that I feel like has helped me is being a high school principal.
Because being a high school principal you are in so many wonderful events, whether it is musicals or whether it is athletic events or whether it is IQ bowls…
You really get to see our children at the top of their game.
And you know you really get to see another level.
And I think that all of those experiences help you to find things in common with them, the white males.
And so I’m constantly looking for things in common, so that we can build the relationships, and that you have other people that are speaking for you, too…

The superintendent details the necessity she feels to ensuring she has positive working relationships with local politicians, as she understands these relationships greatly affect the school system. She approaches this work as if it is a graduate school course in its own right: she attends weekly meetings she is not required to attend; she studies each political figure; she
interprets their actions and words to recognize what they value; and she aligns herself with male allies to help communicate her and the school system’s needs to the men. She recognizes the intensity of such an approach, and likewise understands this dedication to building relationships with the exclusively white male politicians can be “strange.” By drawing from her experiences as a high school principal, she works to identify commonalities between her work and the values of the men while also leveraging other people to help nurture the relationships. While the challenges of working with the local politicians could be ignored, the superintendent understands the necessity to dedicate substantial energy, time, and focus on these relationships. This hard work ensures she is all in for the benefit of her students. As evidenced through dedication to her students, staff, parents, community, and the school system, superintendent 14 works tirelessly to demonstrate her narrative strategy of being all in.

Play The Girl Card.

A third and critical way that superintendent 14 demonstrates her narrative strategy of being all in is through her ability to adapt to gender issues. The superintendent explained that throughout her career, she has experienced varying degrees of sexism and stereotyping as a female leader. Her ability to acknowledge and adapt her behavior to these gender issues has allowed her to find success as a women leader in a male-dominated arena. Additionally, this adaptability has allowed her to leverage her narrative strategy of being all in for students and their successes. The superintendent explained how this stereotyping of women in the superintendency begins with initial judgements of women as mothers and considerations of their attire:

I think there were times where people, um… behaved as if I did not care enough about my children to spend more time with them.
And, um I do feel like we’re more judged on what we wear.
And, um, I mean you see my hair is like this today. (Points to hair.) I mean I go…but if I had to go, but if I was…but if I were at a city council meeting I would play that other role. And, um, and it’s mostly a suit. And I do believe I…and that’s typically how I dress for being the, being a superintendent is typically wearing a suit. And that goes back to a gender role, and I even found putting on a jacket to get into the good-ole-boys club.

While these small details of the superintendent’s life may seem minor to her work, the superintendent’s narration of these stereotypes shows the significant role they play in affecting her ability to lead. In considering how people have judged her ability to be a mother, the superintendent is saddled with others’ perceptions of the level of care she feels towards her own children. Because she is a mother but also has significant demands from her role as superintendent, the superintendent is publicly conflicted between the societal expectations placed on her to be both full-time mother and full-time superintendent. By fulfilling the demands of the role of superintendent, her love for her children is questioned. In addition to the sexism she faces as a mother and superintendent, the superintendent acknowledges how issues of appearance affect her work. As she explains, when she is going out to be the superintendent, she has to ensure her hair is done and she is wearing a suit or suitcoat. She explains to be the superintendent is to wear a suit, as if the two were synonymous. In fact, the superintendent describes how putting on a suit jacket gives her access to the “good-ole-boys club.” Both of these considerations of gender issues force the superintendent to choose between representing her own and true identity as a mother or being dressed as a woman in order to conform to the gender stereotypes established for her as a superintendent.

One of the most significant gender issues the superintendent has had to face has been the pressure she feels to act like a man. In her varying roles and especially as a high school principal,
the superintendent described experiences she had in which she worked to appear tough and able to handle situations the way she and others perceived a male leader would. She illustrated this expectation through an anecdote about a conflict at a high school football game:

I broke my hip breaking up a fight. Um, so I have a scar. It’s about two inches, maybe two, maybe three. And, um, it was a first Friday night of the school year, first game. And we only had three SROs for whatever reason. I mean three, uh, high sch-, three officers, not SROs, but three officers. And, um, we had children that, um, it was a girl fight. And I had been away for a year…. And the children for whatever reason, as you know, children, when you walk up to a fight they typically stop when they know you. And I had been away for a year and so when I walked up they did not stop. And my, um, my assistant principal was with me, and I grabbed their arms and so as they were fighting. I let go of their arms and when I let go of their arms I hit the ground. And you know concrete. So, it was very embarrassing. And so, and then I didn’t want to seem weak then either. And so when I hit the concrete, and then my basketball coach and one of my parents went to help me up and, um, and I just, “You can’t put me down.” And they went, “What?” “Something’s not connecting.” So, I knew immediately I had broken it. So and then, you know, you’re laying on the, um, the game table where you’re taking receipts until the ambulance gets there. So, it was, um, a very humbling experience. And, and I went from that to… I went back in a wheelchair and a walker then crutches. And children as they—and our children are great as you know high school children—as they would walk out the door, um, they would tell me things like, “Oh, [superintendent’s name], my grandmother broke her hip, too, and she just has a slight limp.” And I’m like, “Oh my Goodness. Oh my goodness! I’m going to be ok. I’ll just do rehab. I’m good, I’m good. It’s going to be great.” So, and I do think, when you think about that: I went right into that fight because I thought I had to act like a man. And I was not ever…I’ve always had in the back of my mind. That, that I could not hold back and I could not be perceived as the female. So, you know, at…
probably at that time I’m not appreciating the strengths of the female and thinking of what I perceived as the strengths of a male. And myself always trying to behave like a male would behave, especially being the first principal, female principal at [specific school,] because you know it had a long tradition of, um, excellence with academics and with athletics, and so.

The superintendent’s story about breaking her hip while separating a fight demonstrates the physical and emotional pain and subsequent scars she has received as a woman feeling the expectation to act like a man. When the fight broke out at the football game, the superintendent felt an obligation to attempt to break it up, not necessarily because of her role as principal but because she was concerned if she did not break up the fight she would be judged as a weak female. Not only was the episode embarrassing for her, but it likewise greatly affected her physically, and she had to engage in therapy to restore her ability to move. In reflecting on this episode, the superintendent also acknowledges during that time of her leadership she was focused on being like a man rather than appreciating the leadership characteristics and assets she brought as a female leader. The notoriety of her school and the visibility she felt as the first female principal at a high achieving school led her to feel tremendous pressure to behave as other male principals had. Her ability to reflect on such an expectation helped shape her experience as a female leader in a role reserved for men. After this experience, she was able to learn from it and consider how she could and should adapt her behavior for the gendered experiences she would continue to face as a female leader.

The superintendent explained that as she advanced in her various leadership roles there were few if any other women leaders in her company. Because of this, she always felt a need to represent herself as tough and hard working. In doing so, she felt she would show her value and her worth, giving her enough credibility to be a leader in an all-male club. She described the
effects this expectation had on her as she was moving through the system towards the superintendency:

It was, um, it was one of those situations. I always felt like I had to do things twice as good, and I had to be twice as tough. You know? And the place where I had, um, that I was the first female pri... middle school principal I had been an assistant principal there. Um, five years before and, um, while I was there I was the only female with a male principal and another male assistant principal...and so, you know, I had to be tough then, too. So, I think, um, I always felt like especially, uh, the first principal at the, the first female at the middle school and the high school, you know... I couldn’t let them see me cry. And I had to be tougher, work longer hours, I could never say that my family was a reason I could leave. And part of it could have been my age, too. You know, I was 29 when I was elementary principal, and when I became the, um, high school principal I was 39, when I became the high school principal. So, I had to be tougher. I had to work longer hours. I had to visually demonstrate that I could do anything that a male could do and even better. Um, so I think that just knowing that, um... it is a... it is a lot of pressure and it’s a great job. And I think it... knowing that it’s a great job you really want to do your best job.

The superintendent was a pioneer in the system, having been the first female principal at both the middle and high school levels. While she was proud of these accomplishments, she likewise understood significant pressure to perform came with these titles, pressure to be “twice as good” and “twice as tough.” Even as an assistant principal on an administrative team with men, she felt the burden of having to prove her worth and to hide herself: it was not permissible to allow anyone to see her cry, as that would signal weakness. These unspoken expectations were grueling, and she had to visibly prove her value through working longer hours, being tougher,
and masking her identity as a mother. Additionally, she explains she felt these expectations in particular because of her young age in leadership, feeling always she had to prove she was just as good or even “better” than a male leader. In reflection, she considers the role of educational leader a “great job” and insinuates while it carries significant pressure, it has been a role she has enjoyed and, accordingly, has always caused her to want to do her absolute best. Superintendent 14’s firsthand experience with the pressures of gender expectations for women in leadership and her ability to sense, understand, and adapt to such pressure has allowed her to navigate the leadership roles successfully. In doing so, she has been able to demonstrate her narrative strategy of being all in through her desire to do the “best job” possible, even in spite of significant demands on her visibility, performance, and identity.

Throughout her career, Superintendent 14 has also had to navigate the political difficulties associated with gender stereotypes, especially as it relates to working with local politicians and boards of education. The superintendent described the tough balance of female leadership perceptions in their work with politicians and how this has affected her identity:

Because one of the things that, when I was entering the role of admin - of administration, some of the folks were perceived as difficult people. Female administrators were perceived as difficult, and I’m-gonna-have-it-my-way, and I’m-not-going-to-play-well-with-others, and there for…there for a while it was like you, you needed to be careful that you weren’t perceived that way. Because if you were perceived that way people just sort of shut you out. So it’s…it’s navigating those waters. And it’s constantly navigating those waters and constantly trying to build relationships and finding things in common and knowing that…you know, if I really wanted to spend time with more male superintendents I would get better at golf. And if I wanted to do that, if I wanted to spend my time doing that then I could. I could go do that if I wanted to. I feel like now I…I do, I have lots of lots of people that I call and talk with and get advice from.
But, um, I think it is always knowing that sometimes people look at your gender before they look at the type of person you are. And you’ve got to get them to be open to you before they even care what you have to say. And, and sometimes when people come across, it’s trying to hit that medium of not being abrasive… I guess is what I’m trying to say. Being assertive enough…. It’s hard for boards of education to see women running things, and being tough enough to run them. And so I think it’s the perception that women are either very abrasive and don’t play well with others, or they’re not tough enough. It’s like how do you, you know it’s like… it’s just hard for, especially boards. You know I have [specific number of] board members so I’ve got to have… So I need [specific number of] people to believe that that person is the right person to take us where we want to go. And that she understands how to play well with others and… and so I do think it’s that connection piece and the relationship piece and I do think it’s hard to be… that medium of being true to yourself.

Recognizing the stereotypes placed on women leaders, superintendent 14 recalls navigating the balance she faced in having to present herself as assertive but not abrasive. She explains early in her career in educational administration, there were women who were perceived as difficult to work with because of their approach, that these women were categorized as unable to work well with others. Unfortunately, this label on women was so powerful that if one was perceived in such a way, she would be “shut out” of leadership opportunities. Accordingly, superintendent 14 was increasingly aware of how to navigate “those waters” by building relationships and inspecting her actions to ensure her approach is somewhere in the “medium” of assertive but not abrasive. Understanding boards of education often have difficulties in perceiving women leaders as “assertive enough” to run a school system, she works diligently with her board members to ensure they believe she is the right person for the role, attending to her relationships and connections with them. As she does this, she recognizes she is playing a role, that it is difficult
for her and for women to be “true” to themselves when they have to be so cognizant of the perceptions others have about their leadership. It is in this deep awareness of presentation of self superintendent 14 has been able to navigate the difficulties of gender issues and their impact with politicians. Because she has been successful in playing the appropriate role for others’ expectations for her behavior, she has found success in the role of superintendent, allowing her to be all in for students in her system.

An interesting dilemma of gender stereotyping superintendent 14 described facing concerned other women’s perceptions of appropriate female leadership actions. At a time when she was having difficulty, the superintendent sought guidance from another female leader, and she received advice that has remained memorable to her:

I was offended by, uh, a female leader.
About maybe four years ago.
When I was talking about that,
I was having a hard time getting someone to do something.
She said, “Play the girl card.”
I said, “What?”
“Play the girl card.”
I had no idea what she was talking about.
So, once I stepped back and reflected,
I think what she was saying was feeding somebody’s ego and flirting with someone.
I think that’s what she was saying.
So to me that never crossed my mind of ever,
but I think that’s what she was saying and I have not forgotten it.

While the superintendent does not agree with the recommendation shared by her fellow female leader, she understands the complexity of gender issues women face and how they work to navigate those issues in a variety of ways. In this anecdote, the superintendent is given advice to leverage her femininity, to use stereotypic salacious female behaviors to gain favor with a male. The superintendent expresses she had never thought to behave in such a way; rather, she had always leveraged playing the role of behaving like a man to make progress in her role. Although
the “girl card” is not a strategy the superintendent had or would use, it was memorable to her, and memorable enough she recounted the story to the researcher. Accordingly, it provides an illustration of how women work to consciously manipulate their behaviors in order to move ahead in the organization.

Ultimately, the superintendent understands female leaders must be aware of gender stereotypes of their leadership in order to survive in the role. As she reflected on her ability to navigate her leadership roles in spite of gender issues placing tremendous burden on her, she articulated how she approached her work in order to maintain course:

   It’s like I keep my game face on a lot.
   And, and I think that I just, um…
   I think I practiced that for a long time.
   To try to stay in control of my emotions so that, um…
   people did not use those emotions against me.
   And, um, because it’s complicated.
   It’s always so complicated in working with people and, um, earning their respect, especially if you have not worked with them for a while.

To be able to successfully navigate the variety of educational leadership roles in which she has served, superintendent 14 illustrates she approached each day with a “game face.” Because of the stereotypes placed on her, she was required to face each situation as if it were a win or lose situation: there was not any opportunity for her to simply practice; the stakes were always high for her as a female leader. Knowing each day and each situation was a judgement on her ability to lead as a woman, she had to intentionally practice this approach, working to know how to control her emotions so these emotions could not be later used against her. As a woman, she has had to navigate the complexities of working with people, having to earn their respect as a female leader. She felt great demand to prove her worth in a role reserved for men. Throughout her interactions in the role as an educational leader, she has worked to recognize, understand, and work around a variety of gender issues in order to maintain her role as educational leader. It has
been critical to her ability to lead as a female superintendent and be all in for her students. In considerations of accountability, dedication, and navigation of gender issues, the superintendent narrates her leadership story as being all in for students and, consequently, makes meaning of her leadership.

Closing

Elite interviews with 14 NC superintendents provided time and space to honor each woman’s leadership story and experiences. In capturing these stories, the study sought to not only give these women voice but to additionally understand how the narrative strategies employed in their story telling conveyed how they made meaning of their leadership in a male-dominated arena. The researcher’s presentation of each woman’s story individually sought to value each woman’s experience and also served to validate her story, regardless if particular episodes were anomalies amongst the other women’s experiences. In the subsequent chapter, the researcher considers the motifs present across the women’s stories to achieve the third purpose of the study: to identify barriers women face as they ascend and move into the school superintendency. By valuing each woman’s voice and story, this study serves to more authentically understand the causes of the gender gap in the NC school superintendency.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Making Women Men

Superintendents hold significant power in a school system and, because of this power, they have the unique ability and grave responsibility to ensure students receive an excellent public school education. As this study has reviewed, there exists a notable gender gap in the superintendency in which men are 20 times more likely to become superintendents than women, even as women represent nearly 80% of the teaching workforce (Finnan & McCord, 2018, p.10). While much has been written about the causes of gender inequity in educational leadership, an absence of women’s voice in the narrative required further investigation. Accordingly, after review of the literature on the sexual division of labor, the history of the female superintendent, the causes of gender inequity in the superintendency, and the benefits of women in leadership, this study sought to answer the following research question: What do women superintendent stories tell us about the gender gap in the NC superintendency?

To answer the research question, the researcher employed a qualitative approach using narrative analysis framed through feminist theory. By engaging 14 NC female superintendents in elite interviews, the researcher not only sought to give women voice to tell their stories but also analyzed how women make meaning of their leadership stories through analysis of the narrative strategies they employed in the interview process. After analysis of each woman’s narrative strategy, the researcher then identified motifs present across the 14 stories to present common barriers and difficulties women face in their ascension to and in the school superintendency. Overwhelmingly, the researcher found women in the school superintendency faced
circumstances requiring them to conform to a job that was designed, from its inception, for men. To attain the role and then succeed in the superintendency, women were required, then, to behave like men. As Skrla (2003) explains, by normalizing gender roles both in research and practice, likewise has the superintendency been normalized as a man’s job. As demonstrated by the research participants, women are leveraging strategies and approaches to get to, survive in, and conform to a job that is designed for men. In the little progress that has been made in increasing the number of women in the superintendency, such progress has been made by requiring women to manipulate their identities.

In considering how the role of superintendent is making women men, the following overarching motifs identifying barriers to and in the superintendency are presented in this chapter. They include: unequal expectations for women’s work, discriminatory working conditions, unachievable work-life balance, and inequitable pay. Notably, these issues of gender dynamics are societal concerns and not necessarily an issue with solely the educational workplace. In addition to presenting here the motifs found across the 14 NC female superintendent stories, the researcher provides recommendations for practitioners to ensure more equitable and inclusive practices. Instead of making women men, the researcher proposes changing the conception of the superintendency. Finally, considerations of this research study’s limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

**Unequal Expectations for Women’s Work.**

Participants in this study described feeling pressure to prove their ability to lead in order to both ascend and survive in the superintendency role. As one superintendent described, her years of leadership experience have shown her that “men are promoted on potential” while “women are promoted on performance.” The women superintendents described unequal
expectations for women’s work to move towards and remain in the superintendency as being evident in both a higher demand on the amount of experience women must have to be considered for leadership and a higher demand on the amount and quality of work women perform. Butler (1988) explains how the intersection of power and gender with societal expectations for women as subordinate to men has forced women in the workplace to behave as men, including in their adoption of “strategy[ies]…[for] cultural survival,” which the study participants described as unequal expectations for their work production (p.522). The study participants explained these demands were both explicit and implicit both in the expectations set for by others and themselves.

One of the manifestations of unequal expectations for women’s work was presented through a higher demand on the amount of experience women must have to move into the superintendency. Each of the study participants had decades of work experience in educational leadership prior to their appointments. Of the 14 superintendent participants, the average age of the women was 50 years. Their average years of work experience was 27.35 years yet the average number of years the participants had been in the superintendency was just 2.68 years. This massive discrepancy between the average years of work experience versus the average years of superintendent experience illustrates how the female participants worked almost their entire careers to attain the superintendency. Additionally, the average age of the superintendents compared to the average years of superintendent experience shows how these female educational leaders enter educational leadership positions at later ages. In its most recent survey of superintendents, the AASA (2018) found that the median age for women superintendent respondents is higher than the male respondents and that men had significantly more longevity in the superintendency when compared to women. For example, twice as many of their male
respondents had 16 or more years of experience in the superintendency than the women respondents (Finnan & McCord, 2018, p.11). Likewise, the study participants all served in a variety of roles prior to their attainment of the superintendency, with none of the superintendents having advanced to the superintendency from the principalship and all of them having held more than two leadership position prior to their appointments. In considering these women’s experiences, it is evident there is a high demand on the amount of experience women must have prior to a movement into the superintendency. These barriers are examined and reviewed extensively in the literature on women’s advancement into the superintendency position (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Dowell & Lawrin, 2013; Glass, 2000; Pascopella, 2008). If women are required to have more work experience in multiple leadership roles prior to the superintendency yet also enter educational leadership position at later ages, the likelihood of women becoming superintendents is greatly diminished.

In addition to the amount of work experience the women were required to have to enter the superintendency, the study participants described how there were higher expectations placed on them for the amount and quality of their work. Participants described explicit, often public, challenges to their job knowledge from a variety of stakeholders, requiring them to work diligently to prove their knowledge base of even the smallest details of their district’s operations. Visibility was a key expectation of their measure of success, with higher demands placed on expectations of the women superintendents to be in schools more often in addition to the myriad of community events required. Increased demands of availability likewise placed more expectation of work on the women, as they described being contacted more often by their employees, parents, and politicians. The women participants also described implicit challenges to their quality of work that were both externally and internally placed on them. Externally, the
participants described expectations of perfection in task-completion to validate their worth compared to male counterparts. Internally, the women superintendents described feelings of pressure to work twice as hard and be twice as tough while moving towards and serving in the superintendency. The literature on barriers to the superintendency examines how the psychological factor of the perception of women as weak managers leads to the external and internal pressures for unrealistic expectations for women’s work. Brunner & Kim (2010) explain how school boards’ perceptions of women as weak managers keep them from hiring women while there is “very little evidence” that women are weak managers (p.301). Boards’ “negative perceptions of women’s lack of preparedness” then requires women to adopt strategies, such as an exorbitant commitment to work visibility, to advance to the superintendency (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p.301). Additionally, Lewis (2001) explains how women are disadvantaged by societal expectations of women in roles where “high visibility,” such as the superintendency, is required (p.358). In these scenarios, women are held to higher expectations for their work, requiring them to meet an unequal and arguably unrealistic level of work output to even be considered for the superintendency. By establishing a differentiated degree of implicit work requirements for women, the superintendency remains gendered in preference of men.

**Discriminatory Working Conditions.**

In addition to unequal expectations of women’s work, a second motif that appeared across the analyses of the 14 NC female superintendent stories included descriptions of discriminatory working conditions. These conditions most notably included considerations of women superintendents’ daily work environments and interactions with politicians. While the women themselves were split on the specific labeling of such interactions in calling them sexist or discriminatory incidents, for the purpose of this analysis the researcher believes these
incidents across the women’s stories were limiting to women’s advancement enough that they should be considered discriminatory.

The first way in which women experienced discriminatory working conditions was through their often daily experiences with sexism, including considerations of their appearance; their approach to decision-making; and perceptions of their abilities to oversee specific managerial operations of their school systems. Many of the women illustrated their experiences with judgement about their appearances or clothing. Overall, the women understood the unspoken expectation that a men’s business suit is the visual representation of the role. Accordingly, the women were all cognizant of when they had to manipulate through appearances to conform to this expectation by looking like a man-in-charge rather than looking like a woman. The women told stories of their own self-reflections of their appearance to ensure they would not be judged while also narrating illustrations where others had commented on their bare legs, their good looks, or their too-high heels. The double-bind theory examines how women in the workplace are expected to be both appropriately feminine while adopting masculine-stereotyped behaviors, including in their appearance, to be accepted (Ragins, et.al., 1998, p.30). Issues of expectations of the women’s appearance were present in nearly each interview and provided an example of how women conform their appearance to look like men to be accepted.

Women also explained how issues around their approach to decision-making created discriminatory working conditions. The superintendents described a variety of instances in which they were judged by their abilities to navigate the double bind theory; they were expected to be tough like men, but not too tough, appropriately feminine, yet not weak. The women provided anecdotes about stakeholders commenting on their decision-making processes and how these comments were often associated with or compared to men’s abilities, describing them in varying
degrees of toughness, a gendered pseudonym for appropriateness. Dowell & Larwin (2013) examine how women are negatively affected by the double bind theory and decision-making due to top management positions being considered to be male in sex-type. Accordingly, women’s approach to decision-making requires then to adopt an “achievement-oriented aggressiveness and an emotional toughness” that then conflicts with societal expectations of their femininity (p.60). Regardless of whether or not the study participants’ abilities were accepted in their communities, the women were cognizant of how their gender affected the perceptions of their decision-making.

Also, the women superintendents illustrated how they worked in discriminatory working conditions due to perceptions of their abilities to oversee specific managerial operations of their systems. Participants described how as women they were often judged as curricular experts but not able to deal with operations involving facilities or finance. The women provided anecdotes about dealing with negative interactions or comments around these functions or even being excluded from such work. Likewise, they described establishing strategies to combat this stereotype including surrounding themselves with men who could speak in their place or working overtime to learn every nuance of these system operations to prove their abilities. Regardless of each woman’s comfort with these school system functions, many of the women acknowledge being prejudged about their knowledge because of their gender. Glass (2000) confirms this stereotyping by boards of education, writing that one of the barriers women face in their advancement to the superintendency is boards’ perceptions of women being “unqualified to handle budgeting and finances” (p.300-301). Issues of appearance, decision-making, and systems knowledge all presented barriers for female superintendents in their work, creating discriminatory working conditions in which they had to manipulate their identities to behave like men to find success.
The second significant consideration of discriminatory working conditions involved the female superintendents’ interactions and work with politicians. Kowalski et al. (2010) describe the complexity of the school superintendency role, explaining how the varying conceptualizations of the role intensify the job requirements (Evolution of the Superintendent section, para. 2). Part of the complexity of the superintendency includes its political position within a community and the necessity for the superintendent to work closely with politicians. Every single participant spoke about her approach and the dynamics of working with politicians. In these discussions, the superintendents acknowledged they had generally worked for decades in education with little to no experience in working with politics until they reached the superintendency. The women explained that most of the politicians they worked with were white men, and many of the superintendents indicated that some of the local political groups, such as school boards or commissioners, were entirely made up of white men. Overall, the participants’ abilities to work with male politicians varied widely, with some women feeling they strategize their approach well enough to manage these relationships effectively while other participants feeling or having felt nearly destabilized in their ability to lead their districts because of contentious political relationships. Difficulties women faced in their work with male politicians included experiences with manipulations and lies, public shaming of the superintendents, and intentional exclusion from political discourse and decision-making. Heilman (2001) examines how the “lack of fit” theory helps to establish the difficulties women face in their work with politicians, including boards of education. Educational administration has historically been perceived as male sex-typed; Blount (1998) writes that local and state policy in the late 1800s created school administration positions, which “from the beginning,” were established for men (p. 26). Because of this construction, the perceived lack of fit between the requirements of the role
of superintendent and the stereotypic qualities projected onto women results in boards and politicians’ perceptions of women as being a poor fit for the superintendency, creating difficulty in their work relationships (p.660). Regardless of the superintendents’ varying abilities to work with politicians, each woman had developed a specific strategy or set of strategies for engaging with male politicians because it was critical to their ability to lead their school systems. These strategies included relationship building on politicians’ terms and around their interests, manipulating behavior to appear either more strong or meek based on the situation, and being silent to ignore issues of sexism. Even the few women superintendents who felt they had developed effective relationships with local politicians acknowledged that these relationships were a result of intentional work to build their credibility or to act in stereotypic male ways to gain access to the political table. Because the superintendents largely had no political experience prior to the superintendency and then encountered political realms dominated by men, the women often faced difficult experiences they had to work through. In addition to the often daily sexism the women superintendents faced in their roles, the political climates that the superintendents experienced likewise created discriminatory working conditions.

**Unachievable Work-Life Balance.**

Another motif that appeared in the analyses of the 14 women’s leadership stories regards the unachievable work-life balance women face in their ascension to and in the superintendency. Women experienced difficulties navigating the intersection of demands of superintendent, mother, and partner. These difficulties often resulted not from the women’s own expectations of their work but rather the norms established by various district stakeholders, including parents, community members, and politicians. Specifically, the barriers of unachievable work-life balance manifested in the demands of superintendent visibility, societal expectations of women
as wives and mothers, and the complexities of women’s home versus superintendent responsibilities. In these manifestations, the women superintendents were forced to engage strategies to adapt to these male-gendered expectations for the role of superintendent, again making women men.

The climate of unachievable work-life balance is formed first by the unequal expectations for women’s work in the role of superintendency. As explored previously, the women superintendents described how the level of expectation for their work production was significant, with women working harder, longer, and with more attention to detail in order to be perceived as worthy enough to be in their roles. Because women’s work expectations were more rigorous, participants described facing expectations of higher visibility and receiving more contact from staff and politicians. This expectation of constant availability, then, makes any balance with their personal lives, such as motherhood or being a partner, more complex. While male superintendents may certainly have similar expectations as husbands, partners, fathers, and caregivers, the research shows how both the reality of women’s positions in these roles and also the societal expectations of women in these roles create burdens to their advancement to the superintendency (Lewis, 2001, p.358).

Many of the women described the complexities of being mother and superintendent in the leadership stories. Of the study participants, 78.5% of the women were married. 10 of the superintendents had children, with three of the women, or approximately 21%, having school-aged children. Women participants who were not mothers described how they believed motherhood was a barrier to the superintendency and how they did not think they would have become superintendents had they been mothers. When these women were probed on their reasoning, they explained the demands on female superintendents were so significant they did
not believe it is reasonable to balance such demands and motherhood. Some of the women participants who were mothers described their intentionality in waiting until their children were older and out of their teenage years before even considering movement into the superintendency. This allowed them to ensure their children were no longer living with them and gave the women more time and energy to focus on their roles as superintendent. The women participants with school aged children all spoke to their abilities to be mother and superintendent only because of strong support systems, with some women married to men who did not work and could serve as full-time dad, or grandparents who provided significant support to their families. This conflict of the superintendency and motherhood is reflected in the research, with Derrington & Sharratt (2009) finding women with children in grades K-8 are “rarely superintendents” (p.19).

Equally as important to their own views on the superintendency and motherhood was the perceptions of stakeholders on the women. Many women illustrated anecdotes about pressure they felt from others, including community members and politicians, about their status as mothers. These pressures were present as various forms of judgement, with women being judged as unfit for educational leadership because they were not mothers or judged because they were attempting to be both mother and full-time employee. Regardless of whether the women were mothers or not, each of them had a position or strategy on managing the balance. In their approaches, the women were forced to conform their identities as mothers to the demands of the superintendency with no consideration made by systems for conforming the role of superintendency to their identities as mothers. Accordingly, women molded themselves to fit into the gendered role of the superintendent as a man.

In addition to their roles as mothers, female superintendents also had to navigate balancing the demands of their role as superintendent with their role as a member of a family.
Participants described first the logistical difficulties of these competing roles. With legislation that requires superintendents to live in the districts in which they serve, women expressed the difficulties of being able to readily or easily uproot their families to move to districts as superintendents. In these discussions, they often contrasted how perceptions of male superintendent candidates differ as they are seen as having the ability to move their families more easily than women. Likewise, they described instances in which they knew that expectations of community members and politicians were more stringent for them as women superintendents than their male counterparts, where these stakeholders would allow men to hold residence in two counties and commute to their districts while there was more expectation for women to move their entire families permanently to their districts. Again, while men and women superintendent candidates both face the responsibility to move to their new school districts, research indicates that perceptions of women’s roles as wives, mothers, and care-givers disadvantages their advancement (Lewis, 2001, p.358). Also, study participants who had husbands who were not working and therefore found it easier to move around the state faced judgement from stakeholders about the masculinity of their husbands, with women being critiqued for their husbands being out of work. The dynamics of these contrasting viewpoints established unachievable work-life balance for women. On the one hand, the women found it difficult to navigate requirements for moving their families to districts to take on the role of superintendent but conversely, they were judged when they had set up circumstances to navigate such requirements. Both forms of expectations placed women candidates at a disadvantage and required women to strip away their identities as members of a family. Lewis (2001) examined the difficulties women experience in navigating these societal expectations. He explains that because society expects women to be “care-givers,” they are disadvantaged in the workplace,
with male workers being perceived as more able to commit to their work roles while women have “family and children” demands (p.358). Between the expectations of motherhood and the complexities of having a family, the demands of the superintendency on women created circumstances of unachievable work-life balance. To navigate these barriers, the women participants found ways to maneuver their identities such that their femininity was suppressed and they conformed to expectations of a gendered role.

**Inequitable Pay.**

The final motif that surfaced across analyses of the 14 female superintendent stories regarded inequitable pay. Many of the female superintendents spoke directly to concerns about the vast differences in their pay when compared to their male counterparts. The women superintendents often received tens of thousands of dollars less in pay than their male predecessors. When this pay gap was questioned, justifications provided regularly included discussions of the level of experience between male predecessors and the women, even though the women all had decades of educational leadership experience, just as the men did. Some of the women even spoke to instances in which they were paid less than their male counterparts in educational leadership positions, yet they had more span of control than the men. Another form of sexism the women faced in concerns to their pay involved their spouses, as women participants told stories of their salaries being formulated by boards around the understanding that these women had partners who worked and, therefore, they could receive less pay than previous superintendents. Waldfogel (1998) explains that while there is “no doubt” women are earning more pay than they did in the past, it is documented that there continues to be a “compensation gap,” with men continuing to earn more than women (p.138). In addition to the actual discrimination of this gender pay gap, women illustrated a lack of transparency in the
decision-making process of their salaries and negotiations of these salaries. While the women articulated their knowledge of their inequitable pay compared to their male predecessors or counterparts, it remained unclear how boards of educations determine salaries for their superintendents and if these guidelines were consistent between districts. Additionally, the women superintendents who spoke about the gap in their salaries often admitted feeling like they were unable to negotiate their salaries out of fear of being regarded as unappreciative, leaving them silent on this form of discrimination. Callahan-Levy and Messe (1979) found that women are “socialized to have a weaker sense” of their own worth and, accordingly, have been inculcated to believe their pay is not evaluative of their work, perpetuating their silence on pay-issues (p.434). While the women adopted strategies to adapt to issues of unequal expectations for their work, discriminatory working conditions, and unachievable work-life balance, they additionally faced these burdens while being underpaid for their work. Not only is the superintendent role gendered such that women have to adopt strategies to strip their feminine identity to conform to the role, they likewise deal with the disadvantages of being undervalued for such work.

**The Future is Female**

A benefit of this study’s research is the opportunity to make the educational landscape more equitable for women leaders. Through an examination of both the individual women’s leadership stories and the motifs across analyses of the superintendents’ meaning-making, the researcher has developed recommendations for practitioners’ work to ensure an end to the gender gap in the superintendency. These recommendations include considerations of changes to the gendered role of superintendent and likewise changes to networks, coursework, policy, and legislation. Through these changes, the role will be more inclusive of women in their pursuit.
As this study posits, women are finding and leveraging strategies to ascend to and survive in the superintendency, which were evident in the narrative strategies they employed in telling their leadership stories. The strategies they use allow the women to fit into a gendered role designed by and for men, which likely limits many women from gaining entry into the superintendency. Instead of requiring women to become men to attain the superintendency, the researcher recommends that we first change the role of superintendent such that it does not require women to change their identities to get to the superintendent’s desk. There are several ways in which the role can be molded to better accommodate the barriers women face to the superintendency. The women participants spoke in detail about the time demands of their work, especially with significant demands on their evenings and weekends in addition to normal business hours. Boards of education could consider how to make the superintendent’s hours more flexible to ensure it is more inclusive of women, especially for working mothers, to ensure that women can tend to the responsibilities of both their jobs and their homelife more authentically. In addition to potential flexibility of work time, the researcher suggests a restructuring of the responsibilities of the superintendent such that the sole focus on the superintendent’s work is ensuring excellent outcomes for students. Other operational components of the current conceptualization of the superintendent, including facilities, finance, and managerial work would then be delegated to other roles in the organization. By reorganizing the work of the superintendent to focus on teaching and learning, false stereotypes of women’s inabilities to manage operational aspects of the role would not negatively impact perceptions of women candidates. Another change to the currently gendered role of superintendent proposed by the researcher is to ensure an end to the gender pay gap in the superintendency. Currently, women continue to earn less than their male counterparts, and the researcher hypothesizes based
on qualitative data gathered in this study that female superintendent candidates are disadvantaged by the salary ranges used in superintendent searches (Waldfogel, 1998, p. 138). To combat the gender pay gap in the superintendency, the researcher proposes a standardization of superintendent pay based on years of experience, similar to the current model used for the teaching force. While this salary schedule is not without its imperfections, using a similarly published superintendent pay schedule tied to year of experience would eliminate issues of women being underpaid for the commensurate work they are doing when compared to their male superintendent colleagues. Based on the analyses of superintendent stories and the motifs present across their stories in this study, the researcher proposes a restructuring of the superintendent role through considerations of time, responsibilities and pay to ensure the role is inclusive.

In addition to changing the gendered role of the superintendency, the researcher suggests changes to networking, coursework, policy, and legislation that can allow for more equitable educational leadership landscapes. Women who participated in this study explained that often their mentors in leadership were men. These mentors were key gatekeepers who helped women advance in their roles as educational leaders and helped propel them into the superintendency. While it is important that aspiring superintendents have mentors, it is critical for aspiring female leaders to have female mentors. By creating networks of women leaders specifically designed for promoting women into the superintendency, women will be more likely to advance to the superintendency and will also be better prepared for navigating gender dynamics in the role. Additionally, these networks of female mentors for women leaders will help promote a sense of socially acceptable ambition for women leaders such that women can communicate and live out their ambition for the superintendency. In addition to building networks of women mentors, another recommendation for practice the researcher presents is a necessity for educational
leadership programs to include coursework specific to gender issues and navigating politics in the superintendency. When questioned about professional development they had received on gender dynamics, the study participants largely stated they had not engaged in any coursework on gender issues in education. Coursework embedded in educational leadership specialist programs would allow women to discuss gender and political issues they will encounter in leadership and how to appropriately navigate these complexities. This form of coursework could likewise take form in established superintendent residencies for aspiring superintendents, with specific modules or entire residencies for women leaders and dynamics of female leadership in the superintendency. Such residency opportunities would help better prepare women to advance to and navigate their work in the role. The researcher also proposes changes to policy to ensure inclusivity for women in the superintendency. Specifically, the researcher recommends significant changes to maternity leave procedures for women in all roles in the educational workforce. Currently, women are permitted to use their earned sick leave for maternity leave and districts have to use funds to hire interim leaders in their place. The researcher suggests that better maternity leave policies may incentive women to remain in their roles earlier in their careers as educators. This would then allow women to have fewer breaks in service, accrue experience more quickly and, in turn, have opportunities to move into various educational leadership positions, including the superintendency, earlier. In addition to policy change around maternity leave for women, the researcher proposes policy around expectations for board of education work. Specifically, the researcher believes embedding required training for boards of education on gender issues will educate board members such that their approach will ensure more inclusive hiring practices. Additionally, such training will help shift mindsets about women’s attributes in leadership, reforming deficit-based thinking to asset-based. Lastly, the
researcher presents a recommendation to change legislation around requirements for women to live in the school districts they serve. While the time demands of the role of superintendent likely will result in superintendents moving to their districts out of necessity, the legislation establishing a requirement for superintendents to move to districts creates a barrier to the superintendency. Many of the study participants discussed the difficulty of this legislation on their decision about when and how to enter the superintendency, as they often had to consider the needs of their working spouses and their children. Eliminating this legislation would remove a barrier for women having to consider the feasibility of moving their families to different locations throughout the state. By considering changes to the gendered role and likewise considerations of changes to networks, coursework, policy, and legislation, the researcher proposes recommendations for practitioners to ensure a more inclusive educational leadership arena for women.

**Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research**

After conducting the study, the researcher here considers limitations to the study’s scope and provides suggestions for future research. As reviewed in Chapter I, there are limitations to this study. One of the limitations to be considered is that while the study sought to examine barriers women face to and in the school superintendency, participants in this study were women who are currently superintendents. Accordingly, these are women who, while affected by the barriers, did not encounter barriers so significant that they were kept from the superintendency. A second limitation includes this study’s cursory examination of the intersectionality of women’s identities. Because the researcher was chiefly concerned with the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency, this focus limited critical examination of how the complexities of identities affect leaders’ meaning-making processes or their advancement to the superintendency.
Specifically, the researcher did not consider the nuances of gender fluidity, race, and sexual orientation in each women’s story or how these aspects of identity affected data analysis in the study. Because the intersectionality of identity is impossible to parse out, it is likewise impossible to correlate causality between her experiences and specific labeling of those experiences as resulting from sexism, racism, or discrimination of sexual orientation.

Accordingly, such limitations allow the researcher to propose three suggestions for future research study. To expand the opportunity to give women leaders voice, future study of the gender gap in the school superintendency should include women in leadership positions that report directly to a school superintendent. Such a study would ensure that women who may be seeking the superintendency but have not achieved it would be able to describe how they experience female leadership and how they make meaning of their leadership. A researcher, then, could analyze the motifs found in stories of women who are actively seeking but who have yet to secure school superintendencies to better understand barriers women face in their advancement. A second suggestion for future research study concerns boards of education. Because boards of education are directly responsible for the hiring of their superintendents, a qualitative study of board of education members would provide information about the mindsets, processes, and beliefs embedded into the superintendent hiring process. In this study, many of the participants described difficulties of sexism they navigated in their work with these political figures in their communities. Accordingly, a study of their approaches to superintendent hiring and their beliefs on gender issues in educational leadership would provide rich data on the gender gap in the school superintendency. A third suggestion for future research concerns understanding how the multiple intersections of identity affect advancement into the superintendency. Through an
examination of the various aspects of identity, data analysis and study conclusions could more accurately capture and represent the nuances of identity and their affect on leadership.

**Closing**

With an overwhelmingly female pipeline of educators and a looming high turnover in the superintendency, women are poised and ready to lead school systems. Though there exists much research on the factors limiting women’s movement into the superintendency, women’s leadership stories in this study provided opportunity to understand and remedy the gender gap. By identifying and naming the nuances of discrimination in the leadership landscape described by women who have directly experienced such barriers, this study serves to advance efforts in ensuring a more equitable field for leaders. While our current conditions require women to be men to move into and survive the superintendency, this research suggests the superintendency be reimaged through a feminist framework with an understanding of the motifs identified to make the superintendency truly attainable for women educators.
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Basic Demographic Data:

- **Name**: What is your full name?
- **Age**: How old are you?
- **Education**: What degrees do you hold and from what institutions did you earn each?
- **Years of Experience**: How many total years of experience do you have in education?
- **Race/Ethnicity**: What race and/or ethnicity do you identify as?
- **Marital Status**: Are you married?
- **Children**: Do you have any children? If so, how many children do you have and what are their ages?

Interview Questions:

- Tell me about your career path to the superintendency.
- Did you know that you wanted to be a superintendent? Why or why not?
- What is your explanation for the gender gap in the superintendency?
- What do you perceive are the barriers women face in attaining the superintendency? Tell me about a barrier you faced in your advancement to the superintendency.
- Tell me about the most difficult experience you have faced being a female superintendent.
- What does it mean to be a powerful woman leading an organization? Give me an example of this definition in your day-to-day leadership.
- Do you feel that you have to behave a certain way to be a successful female superintendent? How so? Why or why not?
- Does your leadership style differ from your male colleagues? How so? Why or why not? Tell me an example of this difference.
- Describe how your male superintendent colleagues treat you as a female superintendent. Give me an example of this treatment.
- Describe how your employees treat you as a female superintendent. Is it different than how you perceive a male superintendent is treated? How so? Why or why not?
- How do you manage balance between your personal and work lives as a female superintendent? Are there different expectations of your balance between personal and work lives than your male colleagues? How so? Why or why not?
- Describe your relationship between motherhood and the superintendency.
- Have you ever experienced sexism in your advancement to the superintendency?
- Have you engaged in professional development on gender issues in leadership?
- How can we get more women into the school superintendency?
- How can we use this study to acknowledge and affect the superintendency gender gap?
APPENDIX B: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

INSERT SUPERINTENDENT’S NAME:

Good afternoon! My name is Elena Ashburn, and I am a high school principal, an aspiring superintendent, and an EdD student at UNC-Chapel Hill pursuing my doctorate in Education Leadership.

I am seeking your participation in my dissertation study which examines the causes of the gender gap in the North Carolina school superintendency. As you know, while women represent the majority of teachers and principals in NC schools, women represent just 23.4% of school superintendents. These statistics require questioning: if the personnel pipeline to the superintendency is overwhelmingly female, why are there so few female superintendents?

To understand the superintendency gender gap, I will be interviewing superintendents like you in order to collect stories and experiences that elucidate the challenges, barriers, discrimination, and sexism women experience along the pathway to the superintendency. By doing so, we can work together to understand issues women face in educational leadership and how we can create a more socially just system for women.

Because I know your time is incredibly valuable, I’ve included the following information regarding your participation in this study:

- Interviews will be one hour in length and in-person at the location of your choice;
- Interviews will be conducted on any date of your choice in June or July;
- Each participant’s identity will remain anonymous, and no identifying demographics will be included in any portion of the written study;
- Attached to this email is a list of questions for the interview. You may omit any of the questions which you do not feel comfortable discussing;
- The findings of these interviews will be shared with my dissertation committee and other faculty of the UNC-Chapel Hill Education Department as necessary. My dissertation will be published in hard copy and in electronic form and made available to the public through the UNC-Chapel Hill library system.

If you are willing to participate, please reply to this email with your availability in June or July and the location preference for the in-person interview. On the interview date, I will provide a research consent form for your signature in order to participate.

I greatly appreciate your consideration to participate in this important study. Together, we can understand gender inequality in educational leadership and work towards a more socially just workplace for women.

In Service,

Elena L. Ashburn
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Participants

Consent Form Version Date: April 21, 2018
IRB Study # 18-0657
Title of Study: ELENA L. ASHBURN: Superintendent Stories: What Women’s Experiences Tell Us About the Gender Gap in the North Carolina School Superintendency (Under the direction of Dr. Catherine Marshall)
Principal Investigator: Elena Ashburn
Principal Investigator Department: School of Education Deans Office
Principal Investigator Phone number: 919-916-0441
Principal Investigator Email Address: elashbur@live.unc.edu
Faculty Advisor: Catherine Marshall
Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (919) 260-0632

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
This study aims to investigate why there are so few female superintendents in the state of NC. There are three purposes of the study. First, the researcher seeks to identify barriers women face in attaining the superintendency by using a framework provided by Sharp, Malone, Walter and Supley in their 2004 study on female superintendents. The authors outline three major themes for the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership. Their framework includes the following: 1) Psychological factors, including barriers of self-perception, gender stereotypes, and expectations; 2) Limited opportunities, including structural barriers such as certification and education; and 3) Societal expectations, including gender roles and motherhood (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004, pp.23-25). Using this framework, the researcher aims to outline how
varying factors continue to limit women’s advancement. Second, this research serves to provide information on how identified barriers can be changed in order to create a more socially just educational field. Because the barriers to the superintendency are likely discrete, nuanced, and difficult to describe, such barriers cannot be eradicated until they are described. Lastly, this research seeks to give female superintendents voice. Female superintendents have overcome significant obstacles to attain their positions and engage in these roles in male-dominated arenas. Their experiences are the best indicators of challenges women face in advancing in the field. Capturing and presenting their stories not only serves to make the landscape more socially just, but it equally seeks to acknowledge and represent their experiences with sexism and discrimination. You are being asked to be in the study because you are one of 26 current female superintendents in North Carolina and have direct experience with barriers women face as they advance in the educational leadership field.

**Are there any reasons you should not be in this study?**
You should not be in this study if you do not wish to share your experiences in advancement to the superintendency.

**How many people will take part in this study?**
There will be approximately 6-10 people in this research study.

**How long will your part in this study last?**
If you agree to participate in this study, you will engage in one 60 minute in-person interview. The researcher will provide her phone number and email to you should you like to follow up with her after completion of the one in-person interview.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**
If you take part in this study, the researcher will set up a date, time and location for one 60 minute in-person interview. The researcher will then meet you on the agreed upon date and time at the location of your choice. Prior to the interview, the researcher will provide you with the list of questions for the interview. At the in-person interview, the researcher will ask you questions and you will provide responses.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You will not benefit personally from being in this research study.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**
There are no known risks for involvement in this study. All information provided to the researcher will be kept confidential and no identifiers including names, work experience, work location, or demographics will be included in the written report of this study.

**What if we learn about new findings or information during the study?**
You will be given any new information gained during the course of the study that might affect your willingness to continue your participation.

**How will information about you be protected?**
Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in one 60 minute in-person interview. The researcher will ask to capture an audio file of the interview to which you can agree or deny being recorded. If you agree for the interview to be audio recorded, the audio recording will be captured on the researcher’s audio device and will not be shared with anyone at any time. Additionally, all audio tapes will include only a participant number and not the participant’s name. Transcriptions of the audio tape will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone at any time. Both audio files and transcriptions will be stored on the researcher’s computer device on a system requiring a password protected login to access. Audio files and transcriptions will be destroyed upon conclusion of the study in May, 2019.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

_____ OK to record me during the study

_____ Not OK to record me during the study

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?
You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?
You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?
It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

What if you have questions about this study?
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.
**Participant’s Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

______________________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Research Participant                              Date

___________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Participant

___________________________________________________________
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent          Date

Elena Ashburn
Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent
## APPENDIX D: TABLE OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 3

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Total Participant Averages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td>93% Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Female Superintendent</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>27.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Years as Superintendent</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>21.43% Women of Color; 78.57% White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>78.5% Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>71.42% Have Children;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.42% Have School-Aged Children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Skrla, L. (2003). Normalized femininity: Reconsidering research on women in the superintendency. In M.D. Young & L. Skrla (Eds.), Reconsidering feminist research in


