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Full Length Research Paper

Female's Journey to the State Superintendency

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Several studies have emerged over the past several decades attempting to pinpoint potential factors for occupational inequity and inequality for prospective and current female educational leaders. Although women are increasingly obtaining leadership positions in the field, one position has remained elusive to the aspiring female educational leader: the superintendency (Bilken & Brannigan, 1980; Brunner & Björk, 2001; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Mertz, 2006; Shakeshaft, 1987). Overcoming societal perceptions, handling hardships associated with attaining and maintaining one's position, and building powerful, meaningful relationships are some of the foci of previous research; however, there seems to be a piece missing from the current available literature. While one may evaluate the struggles females have faced in attaining district-level superintendent positions, research detailing the female's journey to the state superintendency remains incredibly limited to nonexistent. Through a postmodern-feminist lens, this qualitative study employs Harter and Monsour's (1992) Self-in-Relationship (SIR) interview protocol, in addition to open-ended interview questions, to explore a conceptual framework blending perceptions, reality, and relationships that potentially impact females on the journey to and in service within the state superintendency. From a constructivist, Grounded Theory approach, the study investigates a glaring gap in the current available literature in an effort to answer the overarching question: Do female superintendents perceive gender as playing a role in fulfilling one's duties at the state level?

Keywords: female state superintendent, gender and educational leadership

Throughout American history, females have struggled for equality in all facets of society, ranging from voting and reproductive rights to educational and occupational rights (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Rowe-Finkebeiner, 2004; Tong, 2009). Women's greatest struggle over the course of history, unfortunately, continues: the struggle for occupational equality in leadership positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Working alongside their male counterparts, women have secured careers in the American job market that were, at once, believed impossible for females to obtain; however, major leadership positions in many occupational fields remain predominantly held by males (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). In 1975, Estler asserted that "women are virtually excluded from the higher levels of educational leadership at local, state, and federal levels. . . [and] are only poorly represented at lower levels" (p. 363). In the field of education, wherein a tremendous number of the instructional population is indeed female, the lack of female representation in leadership positions remains astounding even decades later (Young & McLeod, 2001). A number of studies have emerged over the past several decades attempting to pinpoint potential factors for occupational inequity and inequality for prospective and current female educational leaders. Although women are increasingly obtaining leadership

positions in the field, one position remains elusive to the aspiring female educational leader: the superintendency (Bilken & Brannigan, 1980; Brunner & Björk, 2001; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Mertz, 2006; Shakeshaft, 1987).

Witmer (2006) posited that "mothers have been venerated, daughters have been loved, wives have been respected, women have been admired, and a few female national leaders have been revered, but females—half the population in any human culture—have not been valued" (p. 124). She continued:

Various services that females have provided have been valued to a lesser or greater degree, but these services have had their value placed on them by males. Women and women's work have been viewed as a convenience for men. And, until the present generation, women were enculturated to feel privileged that they could serve. (p. 124)

Witmer's suggestion highlights a continued, overarching problem—throughout history, women have been made to feel lesser than men, and, even in the twenty-first century, women have struggled to feel valued as equals. This is where our journey begins.

In 1972, Roby purported that, “because the inequitable educational and occupational treatment of women buttresses the economy’s unequal distribution of resources. . . inequitable treatment is unlikely to be rectified before general economic inequalities are eliminated or greatly reduced” (p. 120). Roby surmised that “within the foreseeable future, the system may not be changed, but if it is not, we all—men and women alike—will be the losers” (p. 139). Even decades after the passing of governmental acts in the 1970’s, including Title IX—which Schmuck (1993) indicated was the “‘single innocuous sentence’ declaring that public schools could no longer discriminate because of sex” (p. 3)—and the Women’s Educational Equity Act, also designed to promote gender equity, gender inequalities in the field of education have yet to be fully rectified (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 1999). Even as educational leaders, females often remain underrepresented, undervalued, and underestimated in the field (Arriaga, Stanley, & Lindsey, 2020; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009), and, as such, many have suggested the reason hinges on differences between men and women (Arriaga, Stanley, & Lindsey, 2020; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Gilligan, 1993; Kelly, Saint-Germain, & Horn, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1981).

Perhaps this may be attributed to the complexity of women’s career development; namely, as Valenziano (2008) noted, women and other minority individuals “must deal with a combination of stereotypes, attitudes, roles, expectations, behaviors, and discrimination when choosing a career path” (p. 2). Offering another potential explanation for continued gender inequality in educational leadership positions, Kim and Brunner (2009) suggested that there may also be differences between “women’s and men’s career mobility toward the superintendency in terms of career pathways and movement patterns, with specific attention to women’s career pathways as they correspond with their aspiration to the superintendency” (p. 75).

Statement of Problem

Overcoming societal perceptions, handling hardships associated with attaining and maintaining the superintendency, and building powerful, meaningful relationships have been some of the foci of previous research; however, there seems to be a piece missing from the available literature. Although one may evaluate the struggles females have faced in striving to attain superintendent positions, primarily at the district/division levels, available research detailing the female’s journey to the state superintendency, or commissionership, as the position is called in some states, remains limited to nonexistent. This research, thus, explored the experiences of female state superintendents to identify any divergent, convergent, or emergent themes regarding gender and the superintendency.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of the study was to unearth shared experiences, challenges, and triumphs, if any, that females face on their respective paths to and in their respective services within the

state superintendency. Focusing on the blending and balancing of perceptions, reality, and relationships, this study thus sought to amplify the voices of these unique female educational leaders while closing a gap in the current available literature. Although research regarding women in educational administration has increased over the past several decades, particularly with regard to the district-superintendent level, the following were unresolved questions that the researcher wished to further explore regarding leadership challenges and/or triumphs females may have faced on the path to and in the service within their respective state superintendencies:

1. What does it mean to be a state superintendent? What does it mean to be a female state superintendent?
2. What unique challenges, if any, do female superintendents face at the state level?
3. How, if at all, do relationships impact a female superintendent’s ability to lead at the state level?
4. How do female state superintendents arrive in their positions?

Although the study did not specifically focus on age, race, or ethnicity, the researcher recognized additional themes that may emerge that stem from, or perhaps are separated from, gender. For the purposes of this study, however, the research focused specifically on the female experience.

Statement of Significance

Conducting this study was significant for educational policy and practice, the participants in the study, and the educational profession as a whole. First, one must understand the nature of policy. In Fowler’s (2009) *Policy Studies for Educational Leaders*, the author defined policy as “the dynamic and value-laden process through which a political system handles a public problem. It includes the government’s expressed intentions and official enactments, as well as its consistent patterns of activity and inactivity” (pp. 3-4). Fowler continued to define government as “elected and appointed public officials at the federal, state, and local levels as well as the bodies or agencies within which these officials work” (p. 4). As political leaders of state government, state superintendents must therefore adhere to established policy to ensure the educational welfare of all students under his or her care; however, established policy may enable or impede state superintendents’ ability to do so. As such, the very nature of this research is directly tied to educational policy. Thus, conducting this study was significant: Not only did the research provide a multi-faceted exploration of current legislative policy that impacts one’s entrance to and operation within the state superintendency, but it also evaluated the role potential occupational gender inequities may play in female state superintendents’ journeys to and performance within the position. As policy is the process and practice is the action (Elmore, 2008), conducting this study was significant for practice as well.

Delving deep into the expectations, duties, and responsibilities of the state superintendent shed light on the way in which

educational and political policy is enacted in day-to-day practice within both the state superintendency and the entire state educational system. Yet, rather than a surface-level, impersonal evaluation of the state superintendency, this study detailed female state superintendents' shared and unique experiences as they implemented federal and state policies and mandates in practice for their respective state educational systems. Thus, considering the personal, reflective nature of this study, the research was also significant for the participants. In utilizing the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) interview protocol, participants actively constructed an illustrative, meaningful image of their relationships and subsequent classifications of themselves and others that they may or may not have previously identified. As such, the research was eye-opening to individual participants. In juxtaposing individual responses, a deeper understanding of collective conceptualizations emerged, and thus the significance of the study more greatly expanded to the group as a whole.

Lastly, conducting this study was significant for the entire educational profession. Not only did the research highlight legislative policy, practice, and expectation of the educational field at the state level, the study also contributed to the limited available literature regarding the female state superintendency. In addition, aspiring female superintendents of all levels may benefit from the examination of historical, political, theoretical, and conceptual facets of the state superintendency to aid in their pursuits of educational leadership positions.

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

Recognizing a gender divide in the field of educational leadership, one could utilize a number of feminist theories as a foundation for research. If one hopes to pinpoint a single cause for the inequalities that continue to exist, however, one will find that a prescribed, one-size-fits-all gender inequality does not exist. As such, this study emphasized postmodern feminism as a foundation from which to build. Postmodernism is, as Lather (1991) defined, "[response] across the disciplines to the contemporary crisis of representation, the profound uncertainty about what constitutes an adequate depiction of social 'reality'" (p. 21). When coupled with feminism, which "asks that women not be forced to 'choose' between public justice and private happiness. . .that women be free to define themselves—instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men" (Faludi, 1991, p. xxiii), this theoretical lens provided a foundation from which to explore female state superintendents' experiences. With regard to the conceptual framework, the study showcased the blending and balancing of three facets—societal perceptions of gender and place, the realities of operating within the state position, and the importance of establishing and maintaining a variety of relationships—which collectively defined state superintendents' experiences.

Methods

This qualitative study examined the female experience and the state superintendency in an effort to illuminate "diverse local

worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions," through a constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Creswell, 2007, p. 64). Along with traditional interviewing, the study employed the two-part Self-in-Relationship (SIR) protocol to lend voice to the experiences of female state superintendents through their unique participation in the data collection and analysis process (Harter & Monsour, 1992). The protocol, which first required participants to answer 12 open-ended questions, then moved into a participant-led portion wherein participants supplied, classified, and analyzed a series of descriptive words used to identify one's relationship with colleagues, family, state board of education, confidant and/or significant other, and self. Collectively, SIR interviews lasted from an hour to an hour and a half in length and were analyzed to identify convergent, divergent, and emergent themes.

Delimitations and Limitations

To amplify the voices of a limited research population, this study was intentionally confined to interviewing current and former female state superintendents. The study did not expressly focus on age, race, or ethnicity; rather, the researcher specifically sought to identify potential shared and unique experiences pertaining to the female's experience and the state superintendency. Any emergent themes of additional classification will be discussed within their respective contexts. In addition to recognizing the delimitations, it is important to consider potential limitations of the study as well. Gender, in evaluating the female's journey to the state superintendency, served as the first limitation. Another centered on the population, in that gaining access to and subsequent availability of securing state superintendents as participants was difficult, given the high-stress, political nature of the position. Likewise, delving deep into the realities of females' respective journeys to the state superintendency reflected some self-restraint due, in large part, to various political implications of divulging specific information. Also, appointed or elected female state superintendents serve at the mercy of governors, boards of education, and the voting public whose wants, needs, and expectations are ever-changing. Consequently, the researcher sought to make contact and interview both former and current female state superintendents in an effort to gain a more in-depth, encompassed understanding of their experiences.

Research Procedures

To answer the guiding research questions, the task was two-fold. In addition to securing participants whose experiences lend voice to a limited research population in the literature, the researcher addressed a number of methodological considerations prior to conducting the study. First, the researcher identified epistemological foundations and carefully chose a research design; then, she considered dual data collection and analysis methods.

Epistemology

Before conducting any study, a researcher must recognize inherent epistemological assumptions. Epistemology “addresses the relationship between the researcher and that being studied as interrelated, not independent” (Creswell, 2007, 247). With regard to her epistemological assumptions, the researcher recognized that she is both a woman and an educational leader who has experienced the sting of gender inequalities; as such, her epistemological assumptions are shaped by prior experiences. Likewise, as one who believes that individuals create meaning in their lives and work, and that through their unique and varied experiences, they grow to understand their surrounding world, the researcher is a constructivist (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2009). The researcher thus believes that female state superintendents cultivate an understanding of their respective worlds through their lived experiences, and, subsequently, the perceptions, realities, and relationships they experience collectively shape their worldviews.

In juxtaposition with a Grounded Theory approach, which requires the researcher to “derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of the participants,” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13) the researcher relied on participants’ views to inform an understanding of the female’s journey to the state superintendency. Creswell (2009) explained:

Constructivist grounded theory is a form of grounded theory squarely in the interpretive tradition of qualitative research. As such, it is less structured than traditional approaches to grounded theory. The constructivist approach incorporates the researcher’s views; uncovers experiences with embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships; and makes visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity. (p. 238)

Considering a conceptual framework of perceptions, realities, and relationships, as well as an interactive research design and use of the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) interview protocol, a constructivist grounded theory epistemology was appropriately suited for this research.

Because “any view is a view from some perspective, and therefore is shaped by the location (social and theoretical) and ‘lens’ of the observer,” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 39) one can not necessarily “control” for bias; however, it is vital to recognize the researcher’s place and thoughts within the research. As such, the researcher employed a number of qualitative methods to address researcher subjectivity, including crafting an identity memo and writing several subjectivity memos, wherein she detailed her thoughts, feelings, and emotions with regard to the ongoing research.

Research Design

Maxwell (2005) asserted that designing a study requires more than simply borrowing a previously-strategized design and crossing one’s fingers in hopes that it is faithfully implemented. As such, qualitative research “does not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed

sequence of steps, but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (p. 3). In addition to employing a Grounded Theory research strategy, utilizing an interconnected guide such as Maxwell’s provided an encompassed understanding of the female’s journey to the state superintendency. Likewise, Maxwell’s interactive design allowed for a deeper exploration of the conceptual framework, wherein the female superintendent must blend and balance perceptions, realities, and relationships in order to effectively lead at the state level.

Participant Selection

To promote a greater understanding of the female state superintendent and her respective challenges, triumphs, and experiences, participants were purposively selected according to the following criteria:

1. No more than 10 female state superintendents
2. Balance of current and former state superintendents, with former superintendents having served within the past ten years
3. For research travel purposes, participants were selected from states east of the Mississippi.

The researcher discovered it was much easier to contact current state superintendents, as their contact information is of public record and easily accessible via standard Internet searches; conversely, locating contact information for former state superintendents presented a problem, as most choose to go “off the radar” upon exiting the superintendency. However, the researcher secured four current female state superintendents and three former female state superintendents for the study, all of whom served east of the Mississippi and within the past 10 years, meeting the established research criteria.

Methods of Data Collection

In order to paint a metaphorical portrait of the “lived experiences” (Creswell, 2007) of females in the state superintendency, the researcher collected data through a two-tiered qualitative interviewing process. First, through traditional, open-ended questions—which stemmed from the overarching research questions—the researcher secured a general understanding of each participant. The second, more in-depth data collection process employed the Self-in-Relationship Interview (SIR) protocol, which required participants to actively engage in crafting a unified portrait of one’s self through relational descriptors.

Instrumentation

Through two-tiered qualitative interviewing, the researcher gained insight into the female’s journey to the state superintendency. Participants were initially contacted via telephone and/or email, depending on available information, with a subsequent email and/or letter to serve as a follow-up contact. Upon agreement to the study, participants were provided with an information sheet that both detailed the nature of the study and affirmed participant confidentiality. In addition,

participants were asked to complete a data sheet to gather demographic information about each participant. This information was used to identify any demographic connections between superintendents, should any arise.

Both portions of interviews—opened-ended questions and the SIR—were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews were then coded according to three overarching, researcher-established priori codes that tied in directly with the conceptual framework:

1. Perceptions (self and societal)
2. Realities (duties/responsibilities of the superintendency)
3. Relationships (building/maintaining; importance)

All other coding was inductive or in vivo codes developed in data analysis from participants' unique responses. For the SIR specifically, the collected data offered a tangible representation of each participant's classifications from which the researcher coded in juxtaposition with the other participants' representations. From this, the researcher was able to identify convergent, divergent, and emergent themes from the participants' two-part interviews.

Interview Protocol

In order to delve deep into the experiences of female state superintendents, the researcher expanded upon open-ended, qualitative interviewing through the two-part Self-in-Relationship Interview (SIR) protocol to collect data. The SIR interview was originally designed by Harter and Monsour (1999) to better understand relationships among adolescents; however, the protocol has been used for a variety of research interests, including examining depression and developmental effects of childhood sexual trauma on depressed adolescent girls (Calverley, 1995; Calverley, Fischer, & Ayoub, 1994) and evaluating the role of relationships with regard to female educational and business leaders (Lemasters & Roach, 2010, Jones, 2013).

Recognizing the diverse value of participant input and self-examination, the SIR interview provided female state superintendents with an opportunity to actively assert one's feelings and perceptions through a two-part protocol. The first part, which consisted of 12 questions, required participants to thoughtfully reflect on their experiences in the attainment of and service within the state superintendency. The second portion required participants to engage in a five-part activity wherein they articulated, categorized, and analyzed five words to describe how they identify themselves in relation to one's colleagues, family, state board of education, confidant and/or significant other, and self. This articulation served as the first part; for the second, participants then categorized their generated words by positive, negative, or mixed connotations on a tangible representation of their relational experiences. Participants then placed their 25 generated words on a bulls-eye, on which words were further categorized by importance to the participants.

The remaining two parts offered participants an opportunity to answer open-ended questions in reflection of the bulls-eye

creation; namely, participants were asked to reflect on what this categorization fundamentally means with regard to being a female in relationship to one's self and others. Collectively, the SIR interviews lasted from an hour to an hour and a half in length.

Data Analysis Procedures

Using Maxwell's (2005) interactive design for qualitative research, this two-part study provided in-depth explorations of the female's journey to and service within the state superintendency. Data collected through open-ended questions and the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) protocol helped to shed light on the guiding research questions. Information attained in data collection provided rich answers to these guiding questions and allowed for a multi-faceted exploration of each female's respective journey.

Blending Maxwell's (2005) and Creswell's (2007) data analysis procedures, data interpretation hinged on the evaluation of researcher-transcribed interview transcripts and participant-created SIR bulls-eye diagrams. To do so, the researcher first analyzed responses provided during the open-ended question portion of the interview process, noting any convergent, divergent, or emergent themes. Then, the researcher analyzed participant-crafted responses supplied through the SIR interview, likewise noting any convergent, divergent, or emergent themes. Upon completion, the researcher returned each interview transcript to the participant for member checking prior to coding. Other than clarifying acronyms, participants did not identify any changes.

Data revealed convergent themes of self and societal perceptions, the realities of the position, and the importance of building relationships. On the other hand, the data highlighted an important divergent theme of gender's role in participants' journeys to the state superintendency. In addition, an emergent theme arose, wherein participants shared their experiences with navigating the political arena of the state superintendency.

Data analysis of the open-ended interview portion allowed the researcher to gain an overall understanding of each female's journey through three specific priori codes: self and societal perceptions, the realities of the position, and the importance of relationships. An emergent in vivo code also impacted every participant: the nature of navigating politics, as did the divergent theme of gender and the journey. Then, prior to identifying common and differing threads between and among the participant-created SIR representations, the researcher explored participants' own words regarding their unique classifications. Lastly, the researcher revisited preliminary field and research notes and journal entries to review initial epistemologies and reflect on the findings.

Results

In examining the female's journey to the state superintendency, similar and varying stories surfaced. Data attained in the open-interview portion revealed three themes complementary of the

conceptual framework developed from a thorough review of the literature: self and societal perceptions, the realities of the position, and the importance of relationships. In addition, themes not initially identified, such as navigating politics and gender and the journey, also emerged to provide an encompassed view of the female's path to and service within the state superintendency. Then, in the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) portion, participants generated, classified, and evaluated their unique self-conceptualizations and designated connotations in relationship to their work colleagues, state boards of education, families, significant others/confidants, and selves. This data revealed a number of interesting components; namely, connotative designations were overwhelmingly positive, adjective placement per category varied depending on current or former service, and personal versus professional relationships indicated an overall "backburner" placement of family and significant other/confidant relationships as compared to work-specific relationships.

Interpretations of Results and Conclusions

Broadly, the findings of this study reflect how female state superintendents make meaning of their journeys to and service within the state superintendency. Specifically, participants' shared words and experiences illuminated a gap in the current available literature by exploring the nature of self and societal perceptions, the realities of the position, the importance of relationships, the navigation of politics, and the role of gender and the journey.

Participants' Own Experiences: The Open-Interview Portion

The open-ended interview portion allowed participants an opportunity to share their respective journeys, noting any challenges and/or triumphs they encountered on their paths to and their service within the state superintendency. As previously mentioned, data analysis unearthed three convergent themes: self and societal perceptions, the realities of the position, and the importance of building and maintaining relationships.

Self and Societal Perceptions

First, with regard to self and societal perceptions, each participant anecdotally detailed conflicting expectations that stemmed from gender; in fact, the responses expressed negative experiences tied to perceptions of gender. Even if these experiences were gained on their journeys to the position, rather than in the position itself, a visible mark was made on each participant in a way that influenced her leadership in the superintendency.

Many of these negative experiences stemmed from public perception of image. As with division superintendents (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987) and public officials (Clark, 1991; Kunovich & Paxton, 2005), both politically appointed and elected female state superintendents must constantly be aware of their projected appearances in the public spotlight. This includes outward physical appearance, on which several participants commented

as an important facet of the superintendency. For instance, one participant indicated that she was at constant odds with her perceived self and the perceived "caricature. . . that other people paint" of her. Another discussed the need to always "look the part," whether cutting the grass, going to the grocery store, or speaking on the floor of the state government. Collectively, female state superintendents indicated the need to consider their outward appearance as important as their words and actions.

Yet appearances are not all that female state superintendents must "keep up"; in addition, several participants noted that being a female state superintendent essentially equated to operating under conflicting expectations. For instance, three participants mentioned unfair classifications between male and female leadership, in that men who take their time making decisions may be considered cautious whereas women may be considered wavering. This is akin to what Brunner and Grogan (2007) asserted:

Because educational administrative roles have been most often filled by men, a male model of leadership has evolved. . . . these experiences, as well as their career paths, formal and informal training, age, and other issues related to gender can create the impression that women lack what is seen as the proper leadership style—that is, they do not exhibit the familiar and accepted masculine persona. (p. 43)

Further inequities with regards to perception surfaced as well, including one participant's unfair treatment and missed leadership opportunity early in her career due to pregnancy. Unfortunately, sex-role stereotypes, such as the perceived disconnect between being a mother and being a leader, often serve as career inhibitors (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). For this participant, securing the district superintendency was delayed because of unspoken yet biased hiring practices regarding pregnant women and educational leadership roles. Eventually, she did overcome those initial gender barriers, yet she felt strongly enough about the early impact to share her disgust. Therefore, juggling conflicting expectations remains a constant obstacle for female state superintendents.

Lastly, two participants commented on negative stigmas of bureaucracy and academia that clouded public perception of their positions in the superintendency. One, as a career-long employee of the state education agency, noted that she has had to overcome the public perception of being "stereotyped as a bureaucrat". The other, in dealing with the public humiliation of a dissatisfied governor, was publicly labeled as an "academic, a psychometrician, and a statistician". These classifier terms carry negative connotations and hinged on biased perceptions. Like all public servants, female superintendents thus operate under high levels of public scrutiny (Kelly, St. Germain, & Horn, 1991).

From participants' stories, one may deduce, then, that perception and gender go hand-in-hand; appearances, conflicting expectations, and negativity surrounding the position itself were collective obstacles identified by participants. With regard to self

and societal perceptions, the data indicated that female state superintendents may be dually judged by society as anomalies serving in what many consider a male-dominated position (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009).

Realities of The Position

In addition to self and societal perceptions, each participant discussed responsibilities, interactions, and expectations that comprise the realities of the position. Of these, participants indicated that addressing state and federal educational curricular mandates, considering a host of policy concerns, collaborating with various stakeholders to overcome push-back from change, and dealing with budgetary constraints stemming from a declining economy served as major foci of their respective superintendencies. These realities echo Brunner's (1998) assertion that superintendents must be prepared "to be collaborative decision makers, to practice a caring way, to focus on curriculum and instruction, and to provide guidance and support for women in the superintendency" (p. 160).

Reflective of the literature, participants shared that state and federal standards have become an integral part of the superintendency (Brunner & Björk, 2001). They indicated that marketing public education has likewise become an important facet of their positions; namely, they felt that they were charged with corralling the entire educational community around a common goal. In most cases, that goal rested on achieving success as prescribed by state and federal mandates. Further, participants indicated that much of their day-to-day responsibilities involved addressing state and federal standards and engaging in the policy work that went hand-in-hand with those concentrated efforts. Participants also commented on the importance of policy work, noting that policy knowledge and innovative approaches to addressing state and federal mandates enabled them to make progress toward achieving higher standards and national recognition.

Dealing with budgetary restraints as a result of the declining economy also presented a difficult obstacle. One participant noted that the economy forced salary reductions, staff cuts, and the merging of many positions which in turn added to her responsibilities as state superintendent and pseudo-deputy superintendent. When asked to expound upon the challenges she has faced being a female in the state superintendency, she quickly replied, "the assumption that I can do two jobs, to be quite blunt. No male would be in this position doing what I am doing."

Participants also suggested that collaboration among and between various stakeholder groups was a vital component of their positions. One, in particular, spoke to the nature of push-back and change; namely, she asserted that although she currently operates in a "progressive state," it's "insular" and that impacting change, even if it is positive, presents a set of challenges. This is reflective of Grogan's (2000) assertion that

superintendents must "affect change that promises better outcomes for all students in the future" and "be comfortable with contradiction, work through others, appreciate dissent, develop a critical awareness of how children are being served, and adopt an ethic of care" (pp. 131-132).

Considering these stories, one may infer that female state superintendents face common day-to-day challenges in their respective superintendencies. To overcome these challenges, many tap into their innate leadership characteristics such as collaborating, prioritizing, nurturing, and carefully considering how each decision impacts the children for whom they serve. Interestingly, these characteristics are generally ascribed to females (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Haar, 2002; Isernhagen, 2002; Pankake, Schroth, & Funk, 2002; Witmer, 2006; Brunner & Grogan, 2007), suggesting that perhaps females are best equipped to address and balance the many personal, professional, and political demands of the state superintendency. "Sometimes stereotypical women's ways of nurturing, collaborating, and caring for others are not female, but are, in fact, critical components of successful leadership" (Pankake, Schroth, & Funk, 2002, p. 77).

Importance of Relationships

As with overcoming self and societal perceptions and dealing with the realities of the position, participants also noted the importance of building and maintaining relationships in the state superintendency. In concert with representations created through the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) interview, participants indicated varying degrees of relationships and their corresponding importance in their lives and leadership. The only elected state superintendent in the study advised that one must "make friends before you need them." Likewise, another participant suggested that one should focus on "maintaining relationships and just generally being kind to people and not burning bridges" because of the cyclical nature of the work. Similarly, one participant mentioned the need to build and maintain relationships because the state superintendent is charged with being the "caretakers of this country's most precious natural resource, our children" and they must develop relationships with various stakeholders to build coalitions and impact positive change. Two participants did not directly comment on the importance of building and maintaining relationships; however, their anecdotes shed light on why doing so is vitally important. For instance, one mentioned the complex relationship between her state board of education and she, wherein members know that she is very guarded in what she says publicly. The other shared her struggles in conflicting relationships between the governor, the state board of education, and herself.

In reviewing these shared experiences, one may infer that relationships are fundamental building blocks from which all operation, change, and success is built. Without strong coalitions, change cannot occur; without trust and support, success cannot be attained. This was most apparent in one participant's shared experience, when the sting of broken

relationships ultimately cost her the superintendency. Other stories detailed the positive impacts of relationships, yet one thing is clear: whether positive or negative, the importance of building and maintaining relationships cannot be overstated (Shakeshaft, 1987).

Navigating Politics

Closely tied to the aforementioned priori themes, participants discussed an emergent theme of navigating politics. Farmer (2009) suggested that a superintendent should recognize the “importance of political skills and diligently [work] to hone them” so that “a gradual transformation occurs,” moving the superintendent “away from seeing political forces as obstructions to progress and toward visualizing political forces as integral stakeholders in the educational process whose contributions are essential in the quest to achieve organizational objectives” (p. 32). Participants in this study concurred: navigating politics is a vital component of the state superintendency. As an elected superintendent, one participant, in particular, mentioned the brutal nature of political jockeying, alignment, and elections; however, other participants noted the struggles they too faced in dealing with the political nature of the position. For instance, one commented on the importance of depersonalizing the work, choosing words carefully, doing one’s homework, and aligning support for initiatives rather than ever going into situations “cold.” Another suggested that partisan politics hinder progress; as such, she guards her personal political affiliation and strives to work in a “bipartisan manner.” Similarly, one participant stressed the importance of adhering to one’s core values rather than becoming “politically involved” and potentially losing sight of the work. Politics eventually got the best of one participant, whose career ultimately succumbed to negative political attacks from her former governor. One may deduce, then, that politics plays a major role in one’s ability to lead in the state superintendency. In fact, one participant signified that, regardless of the situation or initiative, “there’s still politics with a little ‘p’ somewhere in it”; thus it behooves state superintendents to be cognizant of and address political influence and nuances.

Gender and The Journey

Varying experiences of gender and the journey served as the only divergent theme of the research. Each participant commented on whether or not they felt as though their gender played a role in their ability to lead in the state superintendency. For example, one participant suggested that, “as a female [her] tenacity and perseverance have been underestimated”; likewise, another participant mentioned that she “believe[s] while people certainly respect [her], [she is] a girl.” Yet interestingly, when asked to expound upon their personal experiences with gender and the journey, many of the participants indicated that they did not feel as though gender presented an issue in their role as state superintendent. Their shared stories, however, seemingly contradicted their assertions. For instance, one participant indicated that she broke a number of “glass ceilings” early in her career and that subsequently gender did not play a role in her

journey to the state superintendency. One may argue, however, that gender did play a role; namely, her overcoming obstacles early in her career enabled her to move forward on leadership paths that ultimately lead to the state superintendency. Likewise, one participant noted that gender may have hampered her earlier career pursuits but not her attainment of the state superintendency. Although she eventually secured position, these hindrances delayed her ascension many years because of antiquated gender inequities regarding motherhood and leadership. Similarly, another participant said that gender did not present an issue on her journey to the state superintendency; however, she mentioned an instance in which men tried to keep her in her “woman’s place.” Lastly, two participants indicated that gender did not play a role in their attainment of their respective superintendencies. Yet, both of these women followed strong female predecessors who essentially paved the way for their successes. This leaves one to wonder: Had they not followed such driving female forces, what would their journeys have looked like?

Participants’ Own Words: The Self-in-Relationship (SIR) Protocol

For this section interview portion, participants were asked to consider the ways in which they conceptualize themselves in relationship to their work colleagues, state boards of education, families, significant others/confidants, and selves. To demonstrate this, participants utilized the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) protocol, a three-part interview wherein participants generated, classified, and evaluated their unique representations in reflection of their relationship with the aforementioned categories.

Data collected via the SIR protocol provided a deeper glimpse into the nature of relationships as previously discussed. To illustrate how participants conceptualized the aforementioned relationships, each participant was asked to provide five adjectives to signify how she would describe herself in relationship to each of these categories. Then, after generating adjectives to identify how one describes herself in relationship to the five categories, each participant in the study was asked to evaluate whether she would label her provided adjectives as positive, negative, or mixed in connotation. To do so, participants were asked to place a plus sign (+) for positive, a minus sign (-) for negative, or a plus and a minus sign (+/-) for mixed (both positive and negative) connotation for each of adjective.

For the second SIR portion of each interview, participants were asked to review their adjectives and connotative designations and were then instructed to place each Post-it note on the bulls-eye as such: the words that best describe and are most important to who the participant is were placed in the center ring; the words that least describe and are least important to who the participant is were placed in the outer ring; those of moderate influence or importance were placed in the middle ring.

The final component of the SIR protocol required participants to evaluate self-classifications by answering the following questions:

1. Do you think this represents your life? What does this picture mean to you?
2. What role do you think being a female plays in this picture?

Each participant thus reflected on her unique creation and offered explanations for her chosen adjectives, connotations, and classifications on the SIR bulls-eye; from this, each articulated her thoughts and feelings of the representation.

What the SIR Revealed

In reviewing participants' adjectives, connotations, and classifications, several common threads arose that both directly and indirectly aided in further data analysis of the open-ended interview section. Most participants classified their adjectives as positive (+) or mixed (+/-); these words were mostly placed in the "most important" or "somewhat important" rings. Words designated as negative (-) were all placed in the outer "least important" ring, yet there were few adjectives labeled as negative (emphatic, subdued, gossipy, guarded, and complainer). In reviewing their adjectives, connotations, and classifications, several participants indicated that they were probably "too positive" in their initial responses.

With regard to the SIR bulls-eye representations, it seemed as though adjective placement depended on service; for example, participants who currently serve as state superintendents classified adjectives differently from participants who served as former state superintendents. For instance, current female state superintendents positioned more adjectives describing their relationships with their state boards of education and work colleagues as "most important" (reflective, idea-generator, listener, optimistic, negotiator, driven, centered, fun, respectful, engaged, thankful, honest, focused, teaching, learning, and professional), whereas former female state superintendents primarily placed adjectives describing self and family in the center ring (supportive, caring, nurturer, planning, communicating, loving, understanding, futurist, worrier, and thinker). Contrastingly, most former state superintendents placed adjectives describing relationships with their state boards of education and work colleagues in the "somewhat important" or "least important" rings (collegial, careful, impatient, focused, busy, affable, advisor, collaborator, probing, listener, prepared, respectful, and guarded).

With regard to participants' relationships with significant others/confidants, one participant indicated that she is divorced and another that she is single. Many of the other participants shared that their significant others/confidants have played a supporting role in their careers. As such, in describing relationships with significant others/confidants, most participants, regardless of current or former service, positioned those descriptors in the "somewhat important" or "least important" rings (supportive, empathizer, indirect, structured,

opinionated, relaxed, comfortable, enjoyable, pleased, caring, open, sharing, and humorous).

From this, one may deduce that the state superintendency is an all-consuming position. While in service, personal relationships with family and significant others/confidants and internal considerations of self are placed on the back-burner; then, when no longer in service, those relationships return to the forefront. Conversely, while in the state superintendency, participants noted that professional relationships with their boards of education and work colleagues are of greater importance while relationships with family, significant others/confidants, and self take on a lesser role in their lives. One participant best described this dynamic:

My family talks about the toll the job took on me. And I never saw it. And I almost think, whether it's [that I'm] a woman or it was my leadership style or just the way I was, I always gave 150%. I worked 18 hour days, never said 'no,' always was in there. But, my grandson, two weeks after I stepped down from the job, he goes 'Nana, it shows.' And I said, 'What shows, [grandson]?' He goes, 'Nan, you would be wired when you came in here. Just wired.' And—and I think it was that level of tension. Whether because I was a woman it affected me differently or not, but the comparison my daughter and this other woman had this week: think about Hilary Clinton, how she looks.

The tension, as she suggested, causes a disconnect between self and relationships with one's family and significant others/confidants on one hand and one's work colleagues and state boards of education on the other.

An interesting juxtaposition: Female district superintendents versus female state superintendents.

Perhaps the most interesting differences emerged in reflection of SIR classifications. First, participants in this study conceptualized relationships differently based upon their proximity to the position: major differences in SIR classifications for this research stemmed from participants' current or former service in the superintendency. As Marcus-Simpson's (2012) and Jones's (2013) participants were all current district superintendents, each participant's experiences were evaluated in real-time; contrastingly, participants in this study evaluated experiences both in real-time and in hindsight, providing a more diverse, encompassed view of the journey to and service within the position.

The SIR also provided unique insight into how female state superintendents may differ from female district superintendents. For instance, unlike current district superintendents who classified relationships with their confidants or significant others and families as of high importance, current female state superintendents considered relationships with their confidants and/or significant others as "somewhat" or "least important" and relationships with their state boards of education and colleagues as "most important" instead. Conversely, former female state

superintendents answered in the opposite. To better understand why, the researcher revisited the open-ended interview transcriptions and discovered an interesting clue: For those who served in the district superintendency prior to the state superintendency, participants noted that the state superintendency demanded more time and stamina and thus often put relationships with anyone outside of their day-to-day professional levels on the back-burner for the duration of their term.

What They Didn't Say: The Female State Superintendent Data Sheet

Some of the most poignant conclusions may be drawn from the data collected on the Female State Superintendent Data Sheet; namely, two important facets emerged based on what participants wrote rather than what they said: participants' number of children and age.

Children

In reviewing answers on the data sheets, one of the most striking responses was for total number of children. Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) suggested that "as many women strive to satisfy family demands, the constraints imposed by this dominant time structure may explain some of the occupational decisions that women make, including whether to pursue and/or remain in the superintendency" (p. 492). Participants in this study made the decision to pursue the superintendency, but at what cost to building and supporting a family? At first glance, the number of children may not stand out as a component worthy of additional consideration. Of the three former female state superintendents, one indicated "1" child and the other two "2+" children. All three former state superintendents either mentioned their children as participants in various moments in their lives or as reasons for how they operated in the position. For instance, one participant commented on her children's unwillingness to move to another state for her career opportunities: "My son thought, oh my God, my mother's going to deny him his right to go to high school outside of [undisclosed geographical location in their hometown]. And, so I commuted back and forth for 18 months."

As mentioned, one participant's grandchild highlighted the mental and emotional toll the superintendency took on the family while she was in office. Another suggested that becoming a mother changed the way she looked at all of the students in her care:

I saw the children, who I was chosen to work on behalf of, as really my children. I mean, [undisclosed number] of them, as my responsibility. And I think that being a mother shaped part of that. I mean, frankly, a lot of what I thought about many things changed after I was a mother, for the first time.

This, however, only speaks to children of former state superintendents.

All four current female state superintendents indicated "0" children. During the SIR interview portion, one participant

posed a question to herself regarding her choice to not have children:

I often think to myself, 'What would I do if I had my own family I had to take care of?' And quite possible, I wouldn't be able to juggle. I don't know that I would be able to juggle. So, I have chosen a profession to be my life. I am my work.

Two participants did not directly mention their familial choices in the open-ended or SIR interviews; however, one did comment that she often "look[ed] through the lens of a sister, an aunt, you know, from a female's point of view" rather than a mother when considering her role as "caretaker" of the children in her state. Like Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) suggested, then, perhaps these females found it difficult to balance having children and pursuing or attaining the state superintendency.

Age

Another interesting finding hinged on age classifications secured from the data sheet. In reviewing participants' responses, it is clear that most state superintendents take on the position later in their careers. With the exception of one participant, who indicated her age as "45-49," four participants indicated their age as "over 60" with the other two indicating age as "55-59." One may wonder why the majority of participants are close to or beyond retirement age, yet as Wolverton and Macdonald (2001) suggested, "women generally traveled to the superintendency through staff roles and their career mobility patterns were more often horizontal" (p. 75). In comparing these responses with stories shared in the open-ended and SIR interview portions, it seems as though their ages reflect the diverse experiences they have gained over years of moving up their respective leadership ladders. Regardless of their pathways, a common thread rested on the many years these women worked through various positions, whether in school systems or in state educational agencies, to ultimately attain the state superintendency. Their ages, in turn, are reflective of their long, arduous journeys.

Race

Arriaga, Stanley, and Lindsey (2020) suggest that "women, especially women of color, in high-level, educational leadership position are often viewed as exceptions rather than the rule" (p. 5). Although no researcher-prescribed delimitation influenced the population's race or ethnicity, participants included six Caucasian females and one African-American female. In discussion of race, the African-American participant noted that, although she could be considered "twice-exceptional" as an African-American and a female; however, she commented that "being a female is far more profound than race" with regard to questions of competency.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the female's journey to and service within the state superintendency to identify any convergent, divergent, or emergent themes in an effort to address a gap in the current available literature. This

goal was attained through thoughtful analysis of open-ended interview questions and participant created Self-in-Relationship (SIR) representations for four current and three former female state superintendents. Based upon the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following for future research:

1. To further examine any similarities or differences, this study should be replicated and expanded to include current and former state superintendents of diverse genders.
2. This study should be conducted as a comparative study of female state superintendents and other female state political leaders to determine what role gender may play in the attainment of and service within other state positions.
3. To expound upon the data, this qualitative study should be conducted as a mixed-methods study wherein the Self-in-Relationship (SIR) protocol is quantitatively analyzed.
4. To explore the connections between race and gender in educational leadership development and pathways.

Conclusion

In conducting this study, a narrow, unexplored gap in the literature was examined. Through the shared experiences of the participants, female state superintendents have been given a voice in the crowd of educational research; in listening to their “different voices,” a greater understanding of the convergent, divergent, and emergent experiences of these female educational leaders on their respective journeys to and services within the state superintendency was attained. This study spoke to Gilligan’s (1993) assertion that:

In the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression at the failure of connection. The failure to see the different reality of women’s lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation. (p. 173)

Each participant shared a story; in each story, the richness and diversity of life and experience emerged. Through their candor, convergent themes of overcoming self and societal perceptions, dealing with the realities of the position, and building and maintaining relationships were shared; in addition, an emergent theme of navigating politics and a divergent theme of gender and the journey surfaced. As previously examined, these themes complemented the limited available literature regarding the female superintendency, yet more importantly, participants’ shared experiences paved the way for future research regarding the female state superintendency, an underrepresented “voice” in the literature.

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