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Rachel M. Roberts

*Antioch University - PhD Program in Leadership and Change*

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WOMEN SEEKING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY:  
NAVIGATING THE GENDERED AND RACIALIZED-GENDERED JOB SEARCH

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Graduate School of Leadership & Change  
Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Rachel M. Roberts

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June 2022

WOMEN SEEKING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY:  
NAVIGATING THE GENDERED AND RACIALIZED-GENDERED JOB SEARCH

This dissertation, by Rachel M. Roberts,  
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Graduate School of Leadership & Change  
Antioch University  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WOMEN SEEKING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY: NAVIGATING THE GENDERED AND RACIALIZED-GENDERED JOB SEARCH**

Rachel M. Roberts

Graduate School of Leadership and Change

Yellow Springs, OH

I have been an educator for my entire career. First, as a teacher and over the last decade as a school administrator. During my tenure, I have continually noticed the underrepresentation of women in the highest office: the school superintendent. This has vexed me over the years, and as a scholar practitioner in leadership and change, I have devoted my research to unearthing the inequalities and disproportional realities that exist within high-profile leadership, particularly the public school superintendency. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, this dissertation sought to better understand what happens at the micro-level, especially during and after the superintendent search and selection process, for women who successfully land a final round interview, but ultimately are not selected for the position. More often than not, women are quick to make the shortlist of finalists, and as nearly 74% of all superintendents are male (Tienken, 2021), yet only rarely get offered the position. Through the use of constructivist grounded theory methods, this dissertation reveals a navigational journey riddled with gendered and racialized-gendered experiences rife with barriers for the women who strive for the position. Despite these difficult and challenging obstacles, this dissertation found strength, resilience, and fortitude within the data and the following dimensions: navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences, living my core, drifting from self, The Big Kaboom, and finding peace. As a result, this study asserts three theoretical implications related to the experiences of women as they seek the

superintendency. This dissertation is available in open access AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* grounded theory method, GTM, human females, leadership, school leadership, school superintendency, feminist theory, intersectionality

## **Acknowledgements**

The decision to complete a PhD in your mid-forties, as a seasoned practitioner and professional, is not for the light of heart. Some might even think you are crazy if you embark on such a journey. Others may question your motives and that is okay. The doubters might give you a side-eye, or gentle eyeroll, and comment, “why now?” My response would be something like, “why not?” For me, the doctoral journey has been one of the most impactful, gratifying, frustrating, challenging, fulfilling, and exciting experiences of my lifetime. Again, getting a Ph.D. in your mid-forties is not for the light of heart, or those who prioritize endless hours of free time, and it may not be for those who shy away from discomfort and reflection, as all these surfaces big time. So be warned.

For those who do make the leap the rewards are immeasurable. Also, the journey is not one you travel alone, as many folks support you along the way. Before I go into the myriad list, I must let the women who shared their lived experience with me know that this dissertation would not exist without their bravery and leadership. Thank you!

First and foremost, I would like to recognize the amazing support I have received from my dissertation chair, mentor, and friend, Dr. A. Lize Booysen. From my initial interaction with Lize, in my first residency seminar at Antioch University, our relationship has been one of academic growth and personal reflection. Her willingness to listen, coach, reflect, and push me to deepen my thinking has made me a stronger scholar than she will ever know. Thank you for listening to me, thinking with me, and asking me to step up. Our stretchy-stretch goals were never too lofty for you, and together we made them every time! Lize, I adore you. Thank you so much for your time and your guidance. You are chair extraordinaire!

I would also like to recognize Dr. Harriet Schwartz. Our methodological relationship was sparked during a brief seminar on Grounded Theory and has evolved to a true friendship. Your steady, calm demeanor is such a balance to my feisty energy. Together, we are quite the team! I thank her for her patience as I honed my research skills. She is the consummate teacher. So focused. Harriet, you will never know how much you have pushed me to be better and to recognize the importance of methodological decision making, which often was prompted by my fast thinking and a need to slow down. Thank you so much for all you have done for me as a scholar. I am forever grateful.

Dr. Susan Katz. I thank you so much. From our first meeting in the fall of 2020, to our work throughout my literature review, and so much more. I am grateful that she responded to my random email, sent soon after reading her amazing work. Thank you, Susan, for answering me. Since then, you have pushed me to consider the impact of research on everyone and introduced me to foundational writing beyond my small world. You have asked me to consider perspectives that I would not have otherwise, and subsequently impacted my research in ways that I am so appreciative of. I love you. You have made me an inclusive researcher and a stronger scholar.

The Antioch experience is so different from mainstream doctoral programs. Its unique cohort model must be recognized in these acknowledgements. The core faculty, who are led by the most amazing provost, Dr. Laurien Alexandre, must be included within this acknowledgement. Laurien you are a forward thinking, progressive, and fierce social justice warrior and I am grateful to you and your team. Everything I have learned from the core and adjunct faculty have a place within my heart and in my scholarly DNA. I remember hugging you on the first day of my orientation and telling you, “This is where I need to be. This place is like



home.” Indeed, it is. I would also be remiss to not recognize my coding buddies, my dissertation squad, and my “coffee talk” group. Thanks for being there for me.

I also need to thank my PhD pal, Bonnie Curtis, with whom I spoke to throughout nearly every day while writing this dissertation. Bonnie, we are going to write that article, ENFJ’s write a dissertation. It will be lovely. Quite frankly, I am not sure what I will do with all my time during the day now that I am not checking in with you every second. You really are amazing, and we DID IT!!! And to Sara Berry, who has such a wonderful head on her shoulders and who provided practical advice, cheerleading, and gentle nudges just when I needed them!

Finally, to my wife, Jules Highfield, you are my rock. You held down the fort and made this entire experience possible. Every paper. Every chapter. You listened as I read them aloud and gave me feedback when concepts were not clear. You read every chapter after final edits and still found places where I could grow. Jules, you are the love of my life and my most constant companion. People probably would not believe that over half of this huge book of a dissertation was written in the wee hours of the morning from our bed with strong coffee, you at my side, and Ruthie and Pippa curled in our laps. How funny! I think I will start writing the next project and call it, “How to write your dissertation from bed.” I could not have completed this program without your support, love, and insights. Thank you. This dissertation is for you.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

America's public schools are responsible for educating nearly 50.6 million students in prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade every year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020a). In 2021, the demographic makeup of America's students continues to be more diverse, with 27.3 million students identifying as other than white, and many of our nation's students living in homes that speak languages other than English, with nearly 10% of students identifying as English Language Learners (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020a). The American classroom is increasingly more inclusive as well. Since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1975, the number of students with disabilities in public schools has increased significantly, from 8 million in the late 1970s to 14 million in 2019 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020a; Pew Research Center, 2020). And, while the nation's students are more diverse, unfortunately, our schools' superintendents are not.

The school superintendent is often likened to the CEO position, as it is the highest profile position within the American public school system and is tasked with the ultimate decision making and leadership within prekindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade districts in the United States (Brunner et al., 2005; Grogan, 2005; Tienken, 2021). Data shows that while the teaching field is predominately female, with 77% of all teachers being women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b), the school superintendency is nearly 73% male (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021). The numbers get even smaller for superintendents of color. In 2020, 8.2% of U.S. school superintendents identified as persons of color (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021). According to American Association of School Administrators (n.d.) most school districts in the U.S. serve around 3,000 students; additionally, the largest school districts serve over 50,000 students and most of the largest, urban districts overwhelmingly serve students of color (National Center for

Educational Statistics, 2020a). Nationally, however, the role of superintendent remains a position typically filled by white, middle aged males (Tienken, 2021).

Every 10 years, the AASA publishes its decennial survey of the school superintendency, which looks at many aspects of the superintendency, including the demographic make-up of superintendents, job longevity, and other factors such as superintendent and school board relations (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021). Promisingly, there has been an increase in female leadership and representation over the last 20 years, with the number of female superintendents increasing twofold in 10 years (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021). Much of the literature on women and the superintendency, including exploration of the female leadership gap within the superintendency, has focused on barriers that women face when seeking the role of superintendent such as lack of mentoring (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014; Katz, 2004, 2010; Macias & Stephens, 2019), slow career progression (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Garn & Brown, 2008; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Polka et al., 2008), the good old boys network (Alston, 2000; Brunner, 1998; Connell et al., 2015), and overt and benevolent sexism and the effect of the think manager/think male phenomenon (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Schein, 1978). Additionally, the literature also has focused on positive enabling factors present for women who successfully attain the position of superintendent, including the role of spirituality (Dobie & Hummel, 2001; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Kelsey et al., 2004) and resiliency (Edson, 1997; Kelsey et al., 2014; D. Reed & Patterson, 2007).

Despite the research on the challenges women face, and those factors that may support their success, there has also been very little research conducted on the intersectionality of identities within the superintendency. Crenshaw (1991) is known for her groundbreaking work on intersectionality in the *Stanford Law Review*, and along with Collins & Bilge (2020) is often

credited for bringing the theory of intersecting identities as they relate to systems of power into the mainstream leadership research. At its core, intersectionality has exposed the intersecting nature of gender, race, sexuality, socioeconomics, and other identities and is considered a major feminist and humanist theory. Given the continual focus on barriers and other factors that contribute to the female leadership gap, there has been little focus on intersectionality and the systems, such as school board hiring and advancement practices, that continually promote men over women to the coveted and powerful position of superintendent. The notion that systems for advancement are “competitive, linear, hierarchical” (Littler, 2018, p. 3) are often false; that if one works hard enough and gains experience and the appropriate credentials, they will be rewarded accordingly. Such is not the case for women and the superintendency, as the current system perpetuates gender bias and continually favors the hegemonic norm thus marginalizing women and placing them at a disadvantage for promotion (Acker, 1990; Castilla, 2008) The folkloric concept of meritocracy as it applies to women and their aspirations to the superintendency is problematic and warrants a deeper look into the superintendent search process.

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

This dissertation investigated what happens within the superintendent search process for the female candidate. Much of the literature on women and the superintendency has focused on the barriers women face as they seek the position of superintendent. Additionally, many authors have highlighted the positive enabling factors that support women’s success along with the larger meso level systemic influences such as power, sexism, and leadership mental models that often favor the promotion of men to high level leadership positions. While there has been focus on the meso level influences including the lived experiences of women in search of the

superintendency, this dissertation took a closer look at the micro level interactions that occurred for women in their pursuit of the position. Micro level interactions are those that transpire on the intra and inter personal level within social interactions (Booyesen, 2018). This dissertation waded into the micro level interactions from the perspective of female superintendent candidates after the search process and interviews for the superintendency. Through the use of a grounded theory approach, I addressed the following question:

- What is the experience of the women who make it to the final round of selection for school superintendent positions but do not get selected?

Grounded theory research seeks to know “What is going on here?” (Schatzman, 1992, p. 310). As a complex qualitative research methodology, grounded theory situates or grounds theory within data. Originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 in their seminal book entitled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, grounded theory has influenced sociological research by advancing qualitative methods through an inductive, abductive, and constant comparative process. Since the inception of grounded theory, several second generation theorists have evolved the methodology. Kathy Charmaz, a student of Strauss, has adapted a more constructivist approach to grounded theory, and this dissertation applied constructivist grounded theory methods. The literature review, in many ways, supported the research process through the establishment of sensitizing concepts (Dey, 2007). These concepts, briefly touched upon within this Chapter I, are elaborated further in the literature review in Chapter II. Furthermore, based on the emergence of five dimensions, additional research was reviewed for Chapter IV. Based on my preliminary literature review, it was clear that there has been little investigation into the superintendent search process from the perspective of the female

superintendent candidate, and this study addressed this problem by adding a deeper, mid range theory regarding the gendered nature of the superintendent search.

### **Positionality and Research Stance**

I am a white lesbian, female, and privileged educator. Over the past 20 years, I have dedicated my professional career to education; as a preschool teacher, instructional coach, teacher evaluator, assistant principal, principal, and district level director. During my tenure in public schools, I have worked under several school superintendents, and all but one was male. This places me squarely within insider status, as I am a member of the field of education, and am a female qualified to apply for the superintendency. Insider status is a sociological concept and is achieved when the researcher is a member of a certain group or identifies with a certain group (Britton, 2020; Merriam et al, 2001). I have worked in small, rural elementary schools, and for the district office for one of the largest urban school districts in the US. I am also a middle class lesbian, who is open about my identity within my professional circles. Additionally, my undergraduate studies were heavily influenced by the works of Piaget, Dewey, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, and Montessori, thus providing a strong, constructivist scholarly background that I employed within my research. As Bourke (2014) suggested:

Qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background, (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process. (p. 2)

In this regard, I recognize that my positionality impacted my research. I am also aware that my position as an outsider as the researcher also emerged during this study. I am a white. I am middle class. I am a lesbian. These factors are important to acknowledge. I will not claim to relate the experience of white women with that of women of color, nor can I claim my experience as a white lesbian is similar to all other white women's lived experience. Britton

(2020) examined the role of positionality as a white researcher and noted that continual reflexivity must be employed throughout the research process, especially when interacting with communities of color. As I entered into interviews with women of color in search of the superintendency, I continually engaged my own reflexivity and took caution and care within the process. Furthermore, as I analyzed the concepts that emerged from the data, I acknowledged the unspoken experiences of women of color that may not have come forth during the interviews.

I identify as a feminist researcher. This is key to my research stance and plays a role within my positionality. As a dedicated educator, and as a feminist, I tackled the disparity within the superintendency and the female leadership gap as an effort to disrupt the system that continues to marginalize and keep women from attaining the highest level of leadership. I also acknowledge that my positionality as a lesbian woman and as an educator has impacted my research goals. Furthermore, this dissertation's focus was not purely altruistic in nature; rather, has been deeply personal on many levels. It has been difficult for me, as a woman, to witness the blatant inequity within the highest position in my field, and I hope that my research will have an impact on increasing diversity within the role of superintendent.

### **Constructivism**

As a grounded theory study, this dissertation employed a constructivist stance. I am a constructivist at heart, having completed a bachelor of science in child development, which was heavily influenced by constructivism; and for many years I taught early childhood programming based on a constructivist approach to learning. Charmaz (2014) described the process of applying constructivist grounded theory methods, noting:

Start[ing] with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed. . . . we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. (p. 13)

I believe that the researcher cannot be parsed out from the process, just as the head cannot be separated from the body, as the researcher is intersubjectively involved in the research. This argument is confirmed by Cunliffe's (2011) concept of intersubjectivity. Cunliffe (2011) elucidated the notion of intersubjectivity from both an ontological and epistemological stance.

Intersubjectivity acknowledges:

[That because] there is no independent reality to study researchers explore constructions of social and organizational realities in a particular context and time and/or how we humanely shape, maintain, and interpret social realities through language, symbols, and texts. (p. 656)

I believe that this is true; there is an inherent interaction that builds through the process of conducting social qualitative research, thus embracing the concept of intersubjectivity, constructivism and coconstruction of knowledge. As noted previously, my undergraduate studies have influenced my constructivist leanings and thus, have played a role in my research stance.

My role as researcher required ongoing reflexivity and reflection. Researcher reflexivity is "a holistic process that takes place along all stages of the research process—from the formation of the research problem and the shifting positionalities of the researcher and participants through to interpretation and writing" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014, p. 6).

Throughout the process of constructing this grounded theory research, I continually remained in a reflexive stance; frequently reassessing my engagement, reflecting on the influences of my own positionality while conducting my research. I also revisited the language, coding, and 65 pages of memos throughout the process. The constant comparative nature of grounded theory required me to engage in an ongoing review and analysis of the data. Mills and Francis (2006) recognized the importance of Charmaz's impact on grounded theory and her use of the constructivist approach, noting:

Emergent in her [Charmaz] writing is a recognition that constructivist grounded theorists need to think about the thorny question of how to resolve the tension that exists between developing a conceptual analysis of participants' stories and still creating a sense of their presence in the final text. (Mills & Francis, 2006, p.7)

I hold the social constructivist ontological notion that qualitative research engages in a coconstruction of knowledge through the engagement of the researcher and participants (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also believe that the purpose of social science research is to better understand human phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Unlike post positivist ontological perspectives, social constructivism acknowledges that “multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others” (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). My understanding of this ontological perspective was key to adhering to my research aim and developing trustworthiness throughout the research process. Additionally, as a social constructivist who employed grounded theory methodology, I am aware that my epistemological stance influenced the decisions made throughout the process.

### **Critical Feminism**

Critical feminism holds the position that unequal systems of power exist and disadvantage those who are not members of the dominant, heteronormative, and male establishment (Canaday, 2003; Eichler, 1997; Ferguson, 2017; Hesse-Biber, 2014). As with all critical theories, critical feminism seeks to upend the systems of inequality and has a strong theoretical belief that these perspectives are continually in play and must be addressed in an effort to upend and disrupt social injustice (Eichler, 1997; Kushner & Morrow, 2003). Clarke (2014) posited the elemental nature of grounded theory as implicitly feminist at its core; thus, noting that grounded theory is feminist research and that “social theory no longer precludes addressing differences; rather it demands it” (p. 10).



Kushner and Morrow (2003) explored the intersections of critical feminist theory and grounded theory methods and purported the notion of triangulation of theory, noting:

Theoretical triangulation, in contrast to methodological triangulation, which is usually understood as involving quantitative and qualitative methodologies. We propose a constant grounding process at the level of data gathering and analysis, coupled with internal checks (constant comparisons in the terminology of grounded theory) on theoretical arguments based on back-and-forth movement between questions posted within both feminist and critical theories. (p. 38)

It is important to note the inclusion of Kushner and Morrow's triangulation as it relates to critical feminist theory and my personal research stance and this dissertation. At the onset of this research, I was interested in further enhancing our collective understanding of imbalances of power that continue to marginalize women. By exploring the experience of women who make it to the final round of superintendent search processes, I believe that significant contributions to the field have been made.

### **Significance to Theory, Research, and Practice**

As noted at the onset of this chapter, America's school districts are more diverse than ever before, and yet those at the top continue to reflect the hegemonic norm. It is imperative that our school districts become beacons for diversity and that the female leadership gap shrinks; without a change at the top, true innovation and transformation will be stagnated. In 2019, the U.S. ranked significantly lower than other industrialized nations in reading, mathematics, and science (Pew Research Center, 2019). Additionally, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which is often known as the nation's report card, confirmed similar data. This assessment is given nationally to students in fourth to eighth grade every two years. In 2019, our national data trends continued to show lagging progress in all three subject areas, with no subject area demonstrating proficiency above 46% (The Nations Report Card, n.d.). Furthermore, our most vulnerable school districts continue to show lagging student

performance as well. In 2002, the U.S. Congress implemented a specific cohort of large urban schools known as the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) aimed at looking at their national scores on the NAEP assessment (National Assessments Governing Board, n.d.). These results show very few urban districts making significant improvements on the latest assessment in 2019, with slight improvements in mathematics for only five major districts (The Nations Report Card, n.d.).

Will increasing the diversity of our nation's public school superintendents equate to higher student achievement? This is a difficult question to answer, as many factors contribute to student success, and far too many variables and factors are at play with such a thesis. However, it is important to wonder, how could the diversifying of the school superintendency not contribute to educational improvements? In what scenario would increasing diversity not relate to increased equity? Certainly, increasing the gender and race demographics of the superintendency would increase visibility and increase the diversity of thought and decision making from the top down. Additionally, from a critical feminist lens, it is important to note the role that gender plays within the leadership gap; with so many women employed as educators and yet, so few see themselves reflected within top level leadership.

This stance merely brushes the surface of the complicating factors related to the female leadership gap and the school superintendency, including the role that childrearing and other factors play in women's ascension to high level leadership positions (Kelsey et al., 2014). However, given that women comprise the majority of higher education degrees leading to educational leadership certification with 68.4 % of women earning EdD's, and women have consistently outpaced their male counterparts in all terminal degrees, with 11 years of earning 52.9% of all doctorates in the US (Perry, 2020), one can only posit that the female leadership gap

phenomenon is related to much more than domestic hurdles. This dissertation explored what happens within the superintendent selection process through a grounded theory approach, thus elucidating the gendered and racialized-gendered process from the micro level.

One step in the journey to dissertation is the process of identifying the existing gaps within the literature. Some would say this is a crucial component to the dissertation: reading and critiquing the current literature for opportunities or gaps. This is often where research questions are born. However, Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) highlighted the opportunity that the concept of problematizing, rather than traditional gap spotting, provides researchers to better understand social phenomena. Traditional gap spotting includes the process of “spot[ting] various gaps in existing literature, such as an overlooked area, and based on that, to formulate specific research questions” (pp. 24–25). In contrast, Sandberg and Alvesson noted problematizing as a method of crafting research that “identifies and challenges assumptions underlying existing theory” (p. 32). This notion of challenging current assumptions within the literature is central to the idea of problematizing rather than just identifying the gaps within the literature. Similar to Crit theories (Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, Critical Queer Theories, Critical Disabilities Theory, and Critical Feminist Theory) the use of problematizing places critical thinking and questioning of dominant theories as central to the development of research questions. Scholars who utilize problematizing often seek to disrupt inequities within the current literature.

This makes problematizing a strong influence for my dissertation research. Problematizing as a method of developing a research question places the emphasis on the systems that contribute to the unequal representation of women and women of color through a critical lens, and therefore contributes to the opportunities for what Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) termed “novel” research. The current state of the superintendency demonstrates that there

is a problem within the systems that are charged with hiring superintendents, and this dissertation sought to discover, “What is going on here?”

### **Research Methodology and Design**

This study utilized grounded theory methodology. Originally described by Glaser and Strauss as a research method that grounds theory within data (Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), grounded theory has evolved throughout the years and has been reinterpreted by several students of Glaser and Strauss, and includes the more constructivist approaches of Charmaz, and situational analysis methods of Clarke (Charmaz, 2007; Clarke, 2014; Clarke et al., 2015). I will delve further into the descriptions of the grounded theory approach and how it was implemented Chapter III.

Holloway and Schwartz (2018) emphasized the applicability of grounded theory within equity, diversity, and inclusion research, noting:

Grounded theory has the potential to uncover the elusive qualities of the workplace, take the researcher beyond hegemonic understandings of organizations, hold as central the participants and their stories, portray complex interactions, include an intersectional stance and make visible the role of silence; all elements that situate grounded theory as a viable and powerful method for EDI research. (p. 497)

Thus, grounded theory was a cogent methodological choice for this dissertation. Grounded theory methodology provided the foundation for this dissertation and guided all decisions made throughout the process. Chapter III provides a deeper look at the overall study design and methods used in this dissertation.

### **Outline of Dissertation Chapters**

This dissertation contains five chapters; each building upon the work of the other, and each key to understanding the female leadership gap within the school superintendency as it relates to the study. Chapters I to III outline the grounded theory study. Chapters IV and V,

present the data and their analysis, the mid range theory that evolved from the data, importance to the field, and possible implications for future research.

- **Chapter I.** This chapter includes an overview of the study and its rationale and sets the tone for the research including an in depth overview of my research stance and positionality.
- **Chapter II.** This chapter provides a thorough review of relevant literature and sensitizing concepts through a feminist lens. In grounded theory methodology, the researcher is often viewed as engaging with the data from a neutral stance (Birks & Mills, 2015) and without preconceived theoretical frameworks. However, Charmaz (2014) acknowledged the role of sensitizing concepts within the literature as a starting point for research and the literature review serves as such. Given the researcher stance described previously in this chapter, and the importance of understanding the problem of women and the superintendency, including the strikingly low level of female representation in the position, Chapter II highlights current research on the barrier's women face, the contributory factors for success for those women who have attained the superintendency, and the limited research on superintendent selection. Such a goal requires an analysis of the literature that includes a feminist critique in order to maintain congruence with my positionality and research stance. Additionally, Chapter II highlights the leadership research on the positive enabling factors for women leaders in general, thus creating a strong representation of the sensitizing concepts that support the dissertation.
- **Chapter III.** This chapter outlines the methodology and research design for this dissertation. As a grounded theory study, careful consideration and inclusion of

grounded theory methodology are found in this chapter including the following: research approach, methods, techniques and terminology, proposed sampling, categorizing of dimensions, memoing, coding and analysis, diagramming, and theoretical sensitivity. Additionally, this chapter includes ethical considerations necessary for qualitative research.

- **Chapter IV.** This chapter includes the detailed findings from this study, including the dimensional analysis and explanatory matrix that was used to analyze the data.
- **Chapter V.** This is the final chapter for this dissertation. This chapter includes discussion of the findings and the theoretical model. Included within this chapter are recommendations for future research, implications for the field and leadership practice, and learnings gleaned as a scholar practitioner.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Diversity and representation of women and people of color in top elite leadership positions in the United States is significantly low. Top elite leadership positions are executive leadership roles within organizations, either private or public, and often include positions such as chief executive officer, chief financial officer, and other high profile top positions. In the field of prekindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade education, the top elite position is the superintendent of schools. School superintendents are responsible for the overall leadership of America's public school districts (Brunner et al., 2005; Grogan, 2005; Tienken, 2021) and in 2021 there were roughly 3,000 districts across the U.S. In alignment with existing private sector gendered leadership gaps, the school superintendency is a predominantly white, male position. The most recent data indicates that only 8% of all Fortune 500 companies are led by women (Hinchliffe, 2020), a mere 16% of Hollywood's top grossing films were directed by women (Bakare, 2020), and in 2019, there was only one female executive of a major music label in the U.S. despite the major success of female singers and performers (Ingham, 2019). The state of the school superintendency is no different from these scenarios, with men comprising nearly 73% of America's superintendents despite leading a predominantly female workforce. These statistics confirm what is commonly understood, women in the U.S. still lag their male counterparts in all areas of top elite leadership and occupy far too few of the c-suites.

This review of literature aims to situate current research and theory within the context of women, the superintendency, and the female leadership gap. Through the identification of key concepts related to women in the workforce, the role of the superintendent, and the contributing factors towards the female leadership gap, I will highlight several sensitizing concepts that have informed my understanding of the contributing factors as to why there are so few women in the

role of superintendent. To do this, I will first present the literature on the superintendency and the role itself, and then subsequently unpack several contributory factors that are apparent within the research. It is important to note that this dissertation is based on grounded theory methodology, and therefore, the role of the literature review is different from other research methodologies. Unlike the establishment of a theoretical framework, the literature review for a grounded theory study contains sensitizing concepts that inform the researcher's understanding of the topic (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, sensitizing concepts are evidence of the epistemological reality, as researchers do not enter their praxis as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, nor are researchers able to set aside their prior knowledge. Rather, the literature review provides a concise description of the field in which they are engaged, and thus provides a layer of sensitizing concepts from which their research question is situated. This review situates the problem of women and their underrepresentation in the superintendency within the current literature.

### **The Superintendent**

The superintendent is an influential position, as the superintendent sets the educational agenda for their district and must steward public funds in a responsible manner for the greater good (Kowalski et al., 2011). It is true that school districts are complex political landscapes with competing pressures from a range of stakeholders, including staff, the community, and the school board (Tienken, 2021); thus, making the position of superintendent precarious and difficult, and one subject to many opposing agendas. According to Hutchings and Brown (2021), the challenges today's superintendents face requires a range of leadership skills needed for success: effective communication, instructional leadership, diversity and inclusive practices, data savviness, and the ability to clearly define a vision for their school district. Given such pressures and challenges, it is surprising that 59.5% of superintendents surveyed by AASA in 2020 plan on



remaining in the position, either in their current district or in another (Petersen & Title, 2021). Despite the difficulty of the position, superintendents are choosing to stay on the job as of the 2020 data.

Historically, the superintendency has been the front line manager of the school district with the earliest versions of the position from the early 1900's focused on fiscal responsibility and business practices (Brunner et al., 2000) and has evolved into a more modern version of the position, with a focus on equity and inclusion, student achievement, and workforce development (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tieken, 2021). In the early 2000s school district accountability increased with the Federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act into No Child Left Behind, which ushered a new level of district accountability based on standardized testing (Klein, 2015). These pressures often land squarely within the office of the superintendent and add to the complexity of the job. In the 2020 AASA decennial study, most superintendents responded that their biggest challenges included decreasing funding sources and the repercussions of these decreases on student achievement (Hutchings & Brown, 2021). These factors, including fiscal responsibility, increased accountability, and competing political demands make the position a challenging one. Furthermore, recognizing that the majority of current superintendents' plan on remaining in their positions, the question remains: what space is available for women and women of color to occupy the role?

### **The Female Superintendency Gap**

Almost every ten years since 1920 the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has conducted a survey of the state of the superintendency in the U.S. In this decennial survey, AASA collects a wide range of information including demographic data such as size of school districts, education level of superintendents, professional experiences prior to the

appointment to the position, and personal identity characteristics such as gender and race (Glass et al., 2000). Since 2000, the number of women and women of color in the role has increased, however, the numbers of women in the role still lag far behind their male counterparts. Table 2.1 compares the gender and race make up of superintendents from 2000 to 2020.

**Table 2.1**

*AASA Superintendent Demographic Comparison 2000–2021*

	Male	Female	White	Black	Latinx	Other
2000	86.8%	13.2%	94.9%	2.2%	1.4%	1.5%
2010	75.9%	24.1%	94.0%	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%
2020	72.9%	26.7%	92.56%	3.2%	2.3%	2.02%

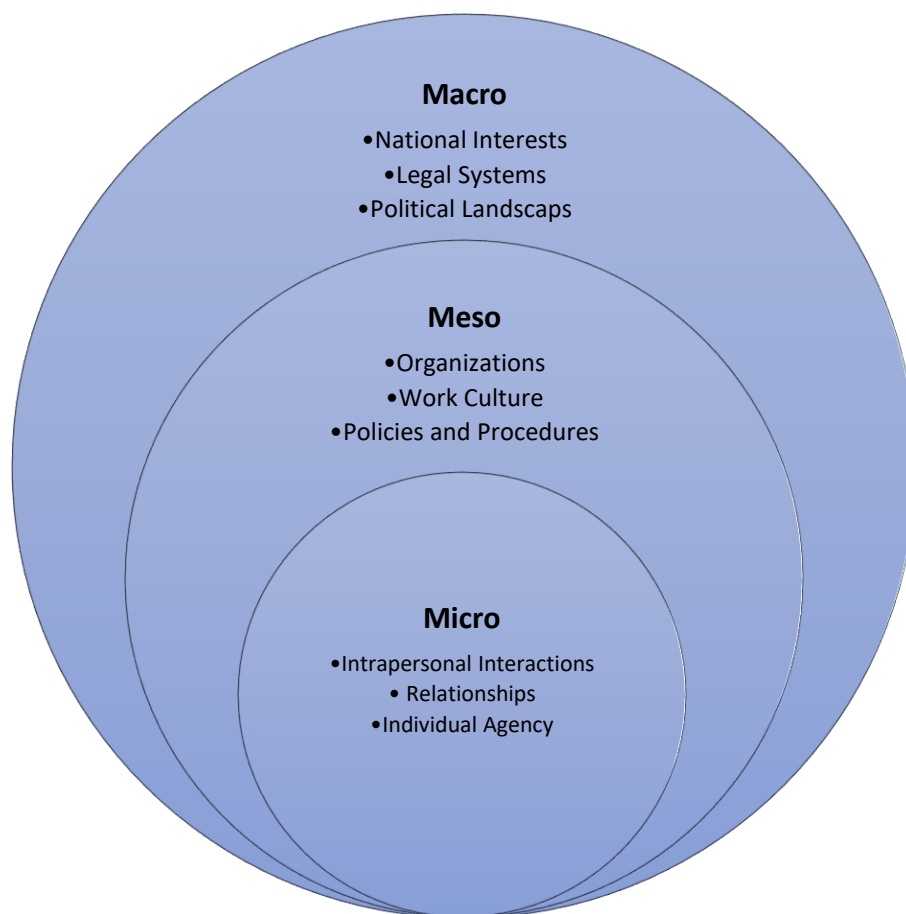
From: “The study of the American school superintendency, 2000: A look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium” by T. E. Glass, L. Bjork, and C. C. Brunner, 2000. AASA. “The American school superintendent: 2010 decennial study” by T. J. Kowalski, R. S. McCord, G. J. Pertson, P. I. Young, and N. M. Ellerson, 2010. R & L Education. “The American superintendent 2020 decennial study” by C. H. Tienken, 2021. PDK.

As Table 2.1 describes, the superintendency has made incremental, slow progress increasing the number of women in the position. Despite this progress, the superintendency remains a predominantly white and male position, and has shown dismal increases in diversity, with only 7.5% of the participants identifying as people of color (Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021; Kowalski et. al., 2011). These numbers tell the continued story for the superintendency in the U.S.: it has a major diversity problem.

What factors contribute to the lack of diversity within the position of superintendent and the female leadership gap? The research shows women face plenty of barriers, including overt and benevolent sexism (Brunner, 2002; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019), the good old boys’ network (Alston, 1999; Brunner, 1998; Katz, 2004, 2010), lack of mentoring (Alston, 2000; Mertz & McNeely, 1990; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), the impact of job

mobility on career planning (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Tallerico, 2000b), over preparedness prior to applying to the position of superintendent (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005; Sperandio, 2015), and the time it takes women to get to the position (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Kim & Brunner, 2009). Additionally, the research sheds light upon the positive enabling factors that contribute the successful ascension of women to the superintendency, including the positive impact of mentoring (Connell et al., 2015; Slick & Gupton, 1993), networking (Connell, et al., 2015; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014), and resilience (Kelsey et al., 2014; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014). This review of literature will unpack the larger, meso level factors that are part of the leadership landscape as well as the macro and micro level influences that exist within the research.

Macro level factors refer to those within the largest contextual environment such as political landscape, nationality, and other larger societal and cultural contexts (Booyesen, 2018). Meso level factors are those related to the organizational level, for example, organizational policies and work culture (Atewologun et al., 2016; Atewologun & Sealy, 2014), and micro level factors are specifically focused on the individual level can include intrapersonal interactions (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Booyesen, 2018). Figure 2.1 illustrates the three levels of social interactions.

**Figure 2.1***Macro, Meso, and Micro Levels of Interaction*

As noted in Chapter I, this dissertation aims to better understand how women experience the superintendent selection process, particularly those women who make it to the final round of selection for school superintendent positions but do not get selected. This is an inherently micro level question as it is focused on the individual aspirant and her perception of the selection process. However, the literature is riddled with research that includes larger, complex influences at the macro level and complicated interactional and organizational factors at the meso level; therefore, all will be explored as sensitizing concepts for this dissertation. Sensitizing concepts within a grounded theory study are those that are backgrounded within overall knowledge and

sense making, and while not set as theoretical frameworks for the research, are influential nonetheless (Charmaz, 2014). As a reflexive researcher, these sensitizing are key to my understanding of the landscape of leadership and the contributory factors related to the female leadership gap, especially within the superintendency.

Furthermore, as a feminist researcher, I am truly focused on elucidating the complexity of our world and the challenges women and specifically women of color face on their leadership journey. Throughout this review of the literature, I will include the terms women and women of color. This is intentional, as at times the literature does not specifically address women of color and makes overarching essentialist assumptions that women of color have universally the same experiences of white women (Butler, 1990). I have found in my review of the literature on the female leadership gap and the superintendency that very often the research does not specifically address the added challenges that women of color face in their leadership journey. Therefore, this chapter also includes specific literature on the experiences of women of color related to the superintendency. By intentionally highlighting the scant research on women of color and the superintendency and differentiating between the dominant discourse, I aim to bring forth feminist perspectives and the experiences of all women.

Eichler (1997) argued that the simplest definition of feminist scholarship is “oriented towards the improvement of the status of women and undertaken by scholars who define themselves as feminists” (p. 10). I would agree, however, the range of feminist discourse can be very complex and often, requires a specific ontological stance. I do not seek to engage in deep, post modern debate on the intricacies of feminist scholarship through this dissertation. I also do not make the claim to be an expert in feminist discourse, yet I do seek to elucidate the perils women face and the challenges that arise in the intersections of gender, race, and leadership,

from a critical feminist theory perspective. Critical feminist theory explores issues of power and hegemonic norms (Cornell, 1995; Rhode, 1990). I will remain in a reflexive, and somewhat critical feminist stance, without strongly adhering to a particular feminist ontology, but rather, as hooks (1984/2000) so amply noted as remaining in “sisterhood” with the experiences of women on their journey.

### **Feminist Theory, Epistemology, and Praxis**

Feminist theory is central to this dissertation and holds at its core the understanding that experiences of women differ from those of men and has historically sought to bring to light these differences (Rhode, 1990). One core agreement within feminism(s) is the role of gender and its interplay with power and the greater society. The term feminisms are a more inclusive form of feminist ideology and encompasses all feminist stances without defining itself as post structural or critical theory (hooks, 1984/2000). Eichler (1997) postulated the complexity of feminist theory and research and built upon the scholarship of Miles (as cited in Eichler, 1997), and the dangers of qualitative research methods that separate the researcher from the subject. The mere act of research may delineate the researcher from the participant, thus, creating a level of power differential. Power is centered within all feminist scholarship and must be illuminated within the research and considered when appraising and conducting research (Gannon & Davies, 2014).

Therefore, I will explore power as it relates to feminist research and theory.

### **Power**

The role of power and oppression is critical within feminist research and theory. Foucault (1983) famously delineated the notion of power over and the oppressed. Foucault’s many philosophical writings on situated structural power have influenced feminist theorists and provided feminist authors with a structure by which to frame notions of power and oppression

(Gannon & Davies, 2014; Kaufman & Lewis, 2014). However, Foucault was not a feminist writer, but rather a philosopher who highlighted the interactions and oppression that is a result of imbalance of power within various contexts, especially within the political frame. Power over and oppression can be a result of structural and hierarchical contexts and constructs (Foucault, 1983). Therefore, understanding the role of power and oppression, and how they operate in relation to structural and systemic mechanisms are key factors in critical feminist theory.

According to Hess-Biber (2014) feminist researchers must be careful to wield their power within research and insisted that there is not a single feminist research methodology. Hess-Biber (2014) noted, “feminist research begins with questioning and critiquing androcentric bias within the disciplines, challenging traditional researchers to include gender as a category of analysis” (p. 5). This sentiment is argued in Gannon and Davies (2014) as well, as they elucidated the complexity of feminist research and its inherent interactions with power and warn that “power is not hierarchical” (p. 14). These sentiments provide warnings to feminist researchers. It is key that the use of power in research and the exploration of power within the data that emerge, are two different constructs. The first, is the power of the researcher to tell or not tell the story of all women. Those who conduct feminist research must be careful that they wield their researcher power in a manner that is inclusive (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014). The second, is another heavy burden. It requires the feminist researcher in praxis to understand the layers of power: power over, power under, power with, and power through action. These are difficult concepts and implore the feminist researcher to remain reflexive and engaged throughout the research process. To better understand and engage in feminist research, it is important to unpack key theories such as standpoint theory (Collins, 1997; Edmonds-Cady, 2009; Sweet, 2020).

## Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory considers all aspects of the lived experience of women and argues that it is centered within their experiences (Sweet, 2020). This is an important theoretical notion, even if the literature may disagree its application and inclusiveness. Collins (1997) warned that early versions of standpoint theory may generalize and thus, marginalize or “other” women of color, by taking a feminist stance that the experiences or “standpoints” of all women are equal. In her earlier writing Collins (1990) noted the complex experiences of women of color through the term “matrix of domination” (p. 555), which looked at the interlocking aspects of race, gender, and socioeconomic status as central to the experiences of women of color. Power and domination of women of color occurs within the location of women’s experiences and therefore, takes on a particular standpoint for analysis (Collins, 1990, 1997; Love et al., 2015). Taking care when applying standpoint theory, feminist researchers must consider the temporal nature of an experience and must consider the nonhuman actors within the experience, such as political landscapes, organizational cultures, and other macro and meso level influences (Edmonds-Cady, 2009; Heckman, 1997; Sweet, 2020).

There is some danger when applying standpoint theory, according to Heckman (1997). This occurs when binary thinking is applied to experiences of women. Therefore, feminist researchers should not be too quick to make assumptions of the lived experience of women, nor to conflate the experience of white women to that of women of color (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Collins, 1997; Heckman, 1997). Alternatively, Sweet (2020) argued that standpoint theory at its core contains a reflexive and privileged epistemology and can be utilized by feminist researchers to bring forth marginalized experiences. In order to do this, researchers must understand the complexity of the lived experiences of women, and the unique challenges that women, especially



women of color, encounter. This sentiment is echoed by Collins (1997) in her call for standpoint theory to be utilized carefully, and with great effort as to not be assumptive of the experiences of women, nor to fall prey to the feminist past that favored the experiences of white women over that of women of color. Understanding standpoint theory, and the locative nature of the experiences of women, especially women of color, aids researchers as they navigate issues of identity, especially within the workplace (Booyesen, 2018). However, standpoint theory alone does not provide the full critical framework necessary to comprehend the complexity of lived experiences, and therefore, it is imperative to unpack the notion of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991).

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality as a theory and praxis is often attributed to the work of Crenshaw (1991) in her writing for Stanford Law Review. In her seminal article, Crenshaw defined intersectionality as a necessary feminist approach that incorporates the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (p. 1244). They expanded on the failings of traditional feminism to address the unique challenges and structural inequalities that women of color face and utilized examples of battery and rape to exemplify the implications on women of color (pp. 1247–1248). Additionally, Crenshaw highlighted the polarizing impact of excluding the intersections of race and gender:

Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourse(s) to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that, to the extent they can forward the interest of ‘people of color’ and ‘women’, respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other. The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. (p. 1252)

Crenshaw elaborated on the crucial need for contemporary, post structural feminism, and antiracism studies to include the specific power and structural dynamics within the discourse. Identity politics that focus on only one strand of identity, either race, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual identity miss the opportunity to engage the multiple dimensions of oppression. Crenshaw's work explicitly called on the imperative to include the intersections of identity within the work of feminism and antiracism and drew parallels to the marginalization of women of color as a fault of traditional feminist and antiracist scholarship, thus leaving women of color out of the dialogue (p. 1259). They added that "efforts to include women of color [come] as somewhat of an afterthought" (p. 1264). Crenshaw's imperative to include women of color as central to contemporary feminist discourse is apparent in other authors' writing on intersectionality, as they have influenced the very praxis of feminist research and scholarship.

It is also necessary to address the intersectional nature of workplace identity (Booyesen, 2018), especially from micro level interactions and identity formation. Intersectionality is inherently focused on multiple identities and group membership; therefore, it has ongoing implications within leadership research (Atewologun et al., 2016; Booyesen, 2018; Love et al., 2015). Feminist research praxis must acknowledge the interplay of intersecting identities, and the impact of these within the workplace to better elucidate the experiences of women. Booyesen (2018) noted this relationship:

Both intersectionality and identity work are focused on how individuals navigate themselves in their worlds, and how they make sense of who they are, in relation to others. Intersectionality, similar to post-modern and critical views of social identity, also focuses on the multiplicity and simultaneity of identities and multidimensional conceptualizations of identity. (p. 15)

At its core, intersectionality acknowledges ongoing systems of power and domination, and seeks to bring forth the voices of marginalized or silenced individuals. It does not promote singular

views of identity, but rather, demands that all aspects of identity are validated and recognized. In praxis, intersectionality can provide a critical framework for feminist research, and therefore promote a more global understanding of the complexity of identity and power (Booyesen, 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Love et al., 2015).

### **Intersectionality as Praxis**

Collins and Bilge (2020) expanded upon the inclusion of intersectionality as “critical inquiry and praxis” (p. 37), arguing intersectionality can be used as a methodology, research tool, and as a daily means to address power differentials within society and noted, “intersectionality is not simply a method for doing research but is also a tool for empowering people” (p. 43). Authors, such as Campbell (2016), Cho et al., (2013), Collins and Bilge (2020), in their most contemporary writings, also debated the origins of intersectionality as a theory with multiple references to Crenshaw (1991) but not fully attributing the theory to one author alone. Additionally, Collins and Bilge highlighted Crenshaw’s inclusion of standpoint theory (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 92) and groundbreaking use of structural and political intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as a method to examine the inequities women of color face and suggested the use of intersectionality as critical praxis.

Recently authors such as Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2009) utilized intersectionality as a theoretical framework in their exploration of the experience of women of color in leadership and highlighted the challenges women of color face in pursuit of leadership opportunities. Their use of intersectionality as a framework positioned the authors to see the challenges women of color face as interconnected to the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. It is within the intersectional axis that the authors’ noted the effect of “triple jeopardy because of the

multiple stereotypes associated with gender, race, and ethnicity that they trigger in others” (Sanchez-Hucles & Sanchez, 2007 as cited in Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, 2010, p. 174).

Forbes (2017) advocated for the use of intersectionality “as a conceptual framework addresses the multiple axes of location and rejects a singular analysis of individuals that views identities as fragmented and solitary units” (p. 205). They echoed the rationale of Collins and Bilge (2020), arguing for the use of intersectionality as a core feminist framework. Additionally, Forbes expands the feminist praxis and contends the use of intersectionality as means to explore female leadership through a gendered exploration that incorporates multiple dimensions of female identities. The leadership gap is often explored through the single lens of female gender, giving little voice to the interplay of gender, race, and class as a factor for the disproportional representation of women within leadership. Furthermore, Forbes (2017) suggested that:

The intersectional model . . . presents a complex, nuanced and integrative framework from which to approach women’s leadership. Gender inequality and exclusion persist, in part, because of the narrow lenses from which and through we view leadership—often White and male. Women’s leadership and communication research needs to extend our analyses to include paradigms of new and different narratives that include and analyze salient identity constructs such as class, culture, nationality, race, and ethnicity, all of which produce diverse leadership outcomes. (p. 216)

Together, the groundbreaking writing of Crenshaw, coupled with the contemporary approach of intersectionality as both theory and practice, provides feminist researchers with a solid framework for study. While intersectionality as methodology and epistemology can be a complex endeavor (Campbell, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Davis, 2008) there is a flexibility in its use and application for feminist research and research on the superintendency. Additionally, the inclusion of intersectionality within this literature review provides a lens by which to better understand the current literature in terms of inclusivity of all women, not just the hegemonic

normative point of view within the predominant leadership writings, especially around women and the superintendency.

### **Identity and the Workplace**

To better understand the challenges women, and women of color, face within the workplace it is important to explore the research on identity in the workplace and professional identity schema (Ashforth et al., 2016; Booysen, 2018; Enke, 2014; Ibarra, 1999) as well as in the social identity context (Love et al., 2015). It is nearly impossible to deny the impact of biases on opportunities for female advancement, as described thus far in the literature. Intersectional theory takes account that the multiple intersections of identity (Collins & Bilge, 2020) such as gender, race, sexual orientation are not mutually exclusive, nor can they be parsed away from the whole. Identity research understands the complexity of identity within context on the micro, macro and meso levels (Booyesen, 2018). Understanding identity theory and research elucidates the power dynamics and interplay between the individual and larger organizational contexts.

Identity at work refers to the personal identity affinities of workers, meaning how a worker shows up within the organization and how they identify within the workplace (Miscenko & Day, 2016). This is a rather simplistic synthesis of a complex concept, which encompasses various constructs such as micro level identifiers such as gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity as well as larger meso level identifiers within the workplace and attributed towards membership within organizations, such as titles, group membership, and overall organizational affinity (Ashforth et al., 2016; Booysen, 2018; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Page & Peacock, 2013).

For women of color in leadership, identity is multi layered and intersectional. Love et al. (2015) used an exploratory sequential, mixed methods design in their intergenerational study on women of color in Denver, Colorado to look at how generational experiences influence notions

of discrimination, being “Black”, negative stereotyping and leadership. They found the following:

Women discussed the inseparability of their gender and racial identities and how these categories of difference interacted to inform how they were perceived by society. A Gen–Xer commented, ‘society treats us as Black females, we are both Black and female at the same time.’ (p. 10)

The authors’ highlighted interplay of identity and experiences of racism or racial stereotyping was experienced and perceived differently by generation. For example, Gen–X and Baby Boomer participants did not consider the intersection of race and gender in the same terms as Millennial participants (pp. 8–9) as the authors noted from the data, “neither Gen–Xers, nor Baby Boomers took into consideration the other social identifications such as class or sexual orientation that impact the lives of Black women” (p. 9). Regardless of generational affiliation, the impact of identity on interactions within organizations and therefore in leadership is clear.

Atewologun et al. (2016) explored “identity work” within organizations in their qualitative phenomenological study of senior leaders in the United Kingdom. The authors’ utilized a process of iterative interviewing and participant journaling in their research and found the complexity of intersectionality and identity within management positions to be a factor for participants within their study. This was exemplified in nuanced interactions that involved identity as the authors’ noted:

Our identity work lens reveals additional complexities at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and seniority in such relationships. Constructing identities at this juxtaposition empowered and weakened privileged and disadvantaged status in subordinate encounters [at times] fast-tracking favor . . . and limiting authoritative capacity. (p. 237)

The complexities involved within identity work as it intersects with gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, was highlighted within this study. The authors also highlighted the interactions between participants, who were all identified as senior leaders, within their

organizations within the context of intersectionality and suggested the importance of further research on intersectionality and identity work.

### **Leadership Mental Models**

To better understand the larger constructs and macro level influences around female leadership and how they contribute to the female leadership gap, a look at the leadership literature is needed, especially the literature that is focused on leadership mental models. A leadership mental model is one that impacts how people perceive the role of leadership and who should fill such a role (Johnson, 2008). Leadership mental models, such as the myth of meritocracy (Guinier, 2015; Littler, 2018), the think manager/think male phenomenon (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Schein, 1978), and those models that create a labyrinthian journey for women in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007) undoubtedly contribute to the female leadership gap. Additionally, the notion of the female leadership advantage (Eagly & Carli, 2003), current discourse regarding agentic versus inclusive leadership practices (Atewologun & Harman, 2020), concepts around identity at work (Booyesen, 2018; Miscenko & Day, 2015), and the democratization of workplaces (Booyesen, 2020) reveal the plethora of complexities within the female leadership experience and are influential sensitizing concepts for this dissertation.

### **Myth of Meritocracy**

Meritocracy is the belief that opportunity is afforded to individuals based on aptitude and accomplishments (Guinier, 2015; Littler, 2018); however, this is often far from reality. What most often occurs is continued privilege that is afforded to those within society that represent the hegemonic norm, thus, marginalizing others, and limiting access to the very systems that can provide and extend opportunity. Within organizations, the altruistic fallacy that is meritocracy perpetuates the belief that with enough grit, determination, and preparation people will gain

access based on their merit. This is particularly problematic for women and women of color. As Castilla and Benard (2010) conducted a study on merit based bonuses and found that given a fictional profile of a higher performing female and a lower performing male, participants continually assigned performance bonuses for the male worker when the conditions determined a meritocratic construct. This was replicated within a graduate school of MBA students with consistent results, and the authors posit that organizational cultures that adhere to meritocratic values may have what they called ascriptive bias. This means that despite employee's efforts and performance, meritocratic influences could still be present. This also makes the case against the very notion of meritocracy, and the false notion of advancement based solely on one's merit.

Meritocracy is a systemic problem in all regards. Guinier (2015) highlighted the negative impacts of what they term testocracy. Testocracy is America's overt reliance on standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT for college admissions (Guinier, 2015). Guinier argued that many factors contribute to the unequal performance on these tests by minority students, from access to high quality schools and other socioeconomic factors and deemed these tests as "wealth tests" (p. 20). Another systematic issue with the folkloric nature of meritocracy, as it relates to women and the superintendency, is the disproportionate number of females who hold terminal degrees in educational leadership which far outweighs the degrees of males in the field of education. In 2019, women accounted for 68.4% of all educational doctoral degree recipients (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020c). Given that women's higher education credentials outweigh their male counterparts nearly twofold, but that the number of women in the highest position within public education is nearly inverse, the legitimacy of meritocracy is in question. Obviously, the challenges women face in their ascension to top elite positions, including the superintendency, are ample and many factors contribute to the female leadership gap. Beyond the systemic



challenges of meritocracy and understanding the impact of feminist thought on understanding and dismantling systems of power, it is important to explore the impact of leadership mental models. These include the negative effects of sex role stereotyping on women's opportunities for leadership and the thorny obstacles that women face.

### **Think Manager/Think Male**

Scholars have long studied the female leadership gap and the negative effects of sex stereotyping and sexism in leadership opportunities. Schein's (1978) seminal study researched the role of sex stereotyping on middle managers and coined the term "think manager, think male" (p. 260), which refers to the bias experienced by women in the workplace. Schein's study looked at over 600 middle managers and found that both male and female participants saw men as demonstrating more leadership prowess, thus effecting opportunities for females to take traditional male roles within organizations. Additionally, Schein (1978) found that such biases had impact on the leadership development for women within organizations, and noted:

That . . . power acquisition skills are not part of the formal training of managers sex role stereotypical thinking with regard to women as manager may limit their opportunities for acquisition of these behaviors. For example, superiors with biased attitudes toward women may be less likely to openly discuss their strategies and tactics of operating with their female subordinates. (p. 265)

Many studies have since confirmed such biases towards the male image of leadership (Schein, 2003; Schein, 2001, 2006), including Schein's (2001) review of global research on 'think manager, think male', which found consistent sex stereotyping in favor of male managers. Building on Schein's work, Booysen and Nkomo (2010) studied nearly 600 black and white male and female MBA students in South Africa using Schein's 92—item think manager, think male index (p. 291). Their findings supported Schein's original theory, however, with an

interesting twist. What they found was that white and black male managers' bias towards males as managers was much higher than male biased thinking for white and black females.

Schein's work set the stage for feminist leaning research on the negative impacts of sex stereotyping and bias within the workplace, and on leadership in terms of opportunities for women and perceived leadership abilities based on the mental models held by those in power. Additionally, Booysen and Nkomo (2010) added value to the dialogue through an intersectional approach that combined race and gender to Schein's original study. Hoyt and Murphy (2016) also explored the impact of stereotype threat within organizations, going further than the phenomenon of think manager, think male, to explore the negative impact of stereotype threat on women leaders. According to Hoyt and Murphy (2016) the concept of stereotype threat, which can often lead to members of groups experiencing the negative impact of known stereotypes, both internally and externally, has a large impact overall on female leadership (pp. 388–389). Beyond the work of Schein and others, it is important to explore the challenges women face within the workplace, and the impact of leadership mental models and stereotypes women face along their journey.

### **The Double Bind**

Women face many challenges within the workplace landscape. Eagly and Carli (2007) described the pathways towards leadership that women experience labyrinthian; filled with many precarious situations, barriers, and challenges such as social role congruity stereotypes (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Social role congruity takes the theoretical stance that the sex stereotypes impact labor roles and societal hierarchies, and place men and women into two different categories of distribution of tasks (Eagly et al., 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002). These expectations are inherently a double bind; women are deemed more maternal, caring, and emotional, so therefore, they are

seen as only capable of certain tasks. This is perilous situation for women and contributes to the labyrinthian challenges for women as they attempt to climb the leadership ladder. Eagly and Carli (2007) also noted that women who do get promoted to positions equal to their male counterparts, are limited in their scope of responsibilities, and often have less authority within the same role.

Koenig and Eagly (2014) explored the social role congruity stereotypes through a series of surveys aimed at honing in on group perceptions of social roles. They found that the effects of communal interpretations of women in roles projected white women in roles such as teacher or secretary, and black women in the roles of teachers, cleaning services, or office workers (p. 375). These findings show that the bias towards less agentic roles, for example, roles that are not typical leadership roles, continues in the U.S. These biases impact leadership mental models, meaning that the bias towards a more masculine image of leadership is alive and well.

These leadership mental models can lead to what Eagly and Carli (2007) called the double bind. This is the notion that when women are promoted to leadership roles, the sex based stereotypes and leadership mental models that favor masculine leadership, place women in a tough spot. Eagly and Karau (2002) found that when women demonstrated more agentic and decisive behaviors, opposed to communal or caring behaviors, they were perceived to be less effective than their male counterparts. This is the heart of the double bind; gendered expectations that result in dislike of women who demonstrate behaviors that are tangential to the role expectations (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Overall, the impact of sex stereotypes and leadership mental models has an impact on the pathways for women in leadership as well as the perception of women once in the role.

### **Female Leadership Advantage**

The school superintendency is inarguably a male dominated field, with only 26% of all superintendents identifying as female in the latest decennial study (Tienken, 2021). Eagly and Carli (2003) in their meta analysis on the female leadership advantage, posited that women, who generally utilize a more democratic and participatory leadership style, hold an advantage in roles that are “defined in less masculine terms” (p. 823). Often, the school superintendency is defined in masculine terms and thus, female aspirants are shut out of opportunities (Martin & Chase, 2017), take longer to get to the position (Connell et al., 2015; Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Katz, 2004) and are often over qualified (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Additionally, for those aspirants who do not fit the heteronormative hegemonic norm, such as women of color or lesbian women, the challenge is even greater for achieving the role or sustaining it (Courtney, 2014; Monto & Supinski, 2014; Wright, 2016).

However, the female leadership advantage has been documented by researchers and includes the agreement that female leaders tend to utilize higher levels of communication, participation within the organization and more relational leadership characteristics (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Offerman & Foley, 2020). These leadership characteristics may prove an advantage for complex organizations, such as large school districts. Public school districts are prone to complex funding challenges, pressure from external stakeholders, legislative mandates, and internal conflicts (Tienken, 2021). Therefore, the advantages of transformational leadership traits may poise women as the perfect leaders of these organizations. Unfortunately, such is not the always the case in many school districts, and the promotion of women, especially women of color into the role, continues to lag nationally, despite a possible female leadership advantage.

Further consideration must also be given to the changing landscape within organizations, including the current trend towards the democratization of workplaces.

### **Democratization of Workplaces**

Booyesen (2020) noted the ongoing evolution of the workplace to more relational and inclusive environments, rather than the hierarchical and patriarchal organizations of the past, and a movement towards more democratic and inclusive practices. In what Booyesen referred to as responsible inclusive leadership, the notion of continual democratization of workplaces, current leadership mental models advance from a binary view of leadership, where the leader is the great knower, agentic, and male, to a more inclusive and people focused practice (Booyesen, 2020). This instance places great emphasis on group empowerment and shared responsibility and its core is an inclusive practice. Building on the work of Pless and Maak (2011), responsible inclusive leadership practices move the leadership deeper into both the micro level of interactions between group members to a larger, meso level changes within group structures in organizations (Booyesen, 2020).

With the democratization of workplaces, responsible inclusive leadership practices thrive as they “equally emphasize the internal organization and the external macro levels of inclusion on one hand, and relational, ethical, and sustainable practices on the other” (p. 198). These are lofty goals for organizational practices and signal a movement towards a more inclusive horizon within the changing landscape of leadership. This is also an imperative that moves organizations away from the patriarchal and dominant, hegemonic norms of the past and signals opportunity for more ethical and inclusive leadership. Additionally, as the notion of more democratized workplaces and as Booyesen (2020) called “more networked” (p. 195) organizations evolve, the shift from previous leadership mental models may also advance and become more inclusive.

Thus far, an exploration of the leadership mental models and their possible impact on women in leadership has illustrated the challenges and opportunities such models present. Given this, I now turn towards the superintendency and the specific barriers and positive factors that influence the female experience and contribute towards the female leadership gap.

### **Women and the Superintendency**

In addressing the larger macro level influences and factors that may contribute to the understanding of women in leadership, I have explored the topics of power and oppression (Foucault, 1983), standpoint theory (Heckman 1997; Sweet, 2020), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and workplace identity (Atewologun et al., 2016; Booysen, 2018), the labyrinthian journey women face in their plight for leadership opportunities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Additionally, I have highlighted the impact of leadership mental models (Johnson, 2008) and the myth of meritocracy (Guinier, 2015; Littler, 2018), as well as the think manager, think male phenomenon (Schein, 1973), the double bind (Eagly & Carli, 2007), the female leadership advantage (Eagly & Carli, 2003), and the democratization of workplaces (Booyesen, 2020) as they pertain to the female leadership gap. I turn now to the meso and micro level experiences of women within the position of superintendent and those who have sought the position. Much of the literature on women and their journey to the superintendency is riddled with examples of overt and benevolent sexism (Brunner, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019) that is enacted within the workplace, either on the journey to the superintendency or once in the position. Additional barriers, such as the notion of the good old boys' network (Alston, 1999; Brunner, 1998; Katz, 2004, 2010), lack of mentoring (Alston, 2000; Mertz & McNeely, 1990; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), the impact of job mobility on career planning (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Tallerico, 2000b), over preparedness prior to

applying for the position (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005; Sperandio, 2015), and the time it takes women to get to the top (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Kim & Brunner, 2009) appeared frequently within the literature and thus are included within this review of literature.

### **Overt and Benevolent Sexism**

The negative effects of sexism as a contributory factor to the female leadership gap has been addressed within the literature. Overt sexism is blatant and obvious. This type of sexism is the stereotypical messaging that women are less competent than men (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Overt sexism contributes to the many challenges women face on their trajectory to leadership and is enacted between individuals within the workplace. In their detailed literature review, Hoyt and Murphy (2016) discussed the role of negative stereotyping and overt sexism within organizations and its effect on female leadership. They found the role of sexism in the form of stereotype threats can have various consequences on female leadership opportunities and performance, including the moments in which women succumb to the impact of stereotyping, and then shy away from leadership opportunities. Stereotype threats are instances when pervasive negative stereotyping occurs and as a result, those who are pilloried with the stereotype, such as women, people of color, people of varying ability, demonstrate impacted performance due to an understanding of the stereotype (Schmader, 2010). Additionally, they noted the negative impacts on female identity when organizations support overt sexism and sex stereotyping. Many other authors also noted the role of overt sexism as a barrier to women's advancement within leadership (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). In their study, Kim and Brunner (2009) explored the experiences of female aspirants and superintendents and found that sexism and sex stereotyping may lead to longer paths to leadership. Stereotypical notions that males are better financial leaders, more agentic managers, and therefore all around

better leaders were found to contribute to the experiences of the participants in Kim and Brunner's 2009 study.

Benevolent sexism is another form of sexism women encounter in the workplace and on their path to leadership. Benevolent sexism is often veiled within complementary condescending language that reinforces the notion that women are subservient to men and need their protection (Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019). This type of sexism is often concealed in positive seeming language may reinforce notions such as women are the fairer sex, however, the negative impact is immeasurable. Glick and Fiske (2001) explored the impact of hostile and benevolent sexism globally and noted the negative effects of such behaviors. They found that women's tolerance to benevolent sexism increased in environments where hostile sexism (overt and blatant) occurred; in fact, the more hostile and sexist men where, the more tolerant women became. It is the subtle application of benevolent sexism within the workplace that slowly reinforces negative stereotypes and presents barriers to female ascension to leadership. Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) surveyed 15 school board hired superintendent search consultants regarding their experience in the recruitment and selection of superintendents for school districts in New York state and found instances of overt and benevolent sexism constant amongst their participants experiences.

Brunner (1998) discovered that female superintendents often experienced overt and benevolent sexism from members of their school boards and other stakeholders within their school districts. In her later work, Brunner (2000) utilized discourse analysis on the narrative data from 12 female superintendents throughout the country and found several examples of the impact of overt and benevolent sexism. Additionally, Sampson (2018) interviewed five superintendents from Texas in her qualitative study and found that her participants experienced



multiple instances of sexism and intimidation, including difficult performance evaluations and gendered expectations within the role. The stories of female aspirants and superintendents are replete with such experiences and the negative impact of overt and benevolent sexism is undeniable. Another challenge women face on their journey or within the role of superintendent is the challenge of the good old boys' network.

### **The Good Old Boys' Network**

Another contributing factor to the female leadership gap is the phenomenon of the good old boys' network. Brunner (1998) interviewed 12 female superintendents through a single case study qualitative approach and found that a barrier to success for female leaders was the need to break through the "old boys' network" (p. 14); those women continually needed to balance their approaches to communication and leadership based solely on their gender. Furthermore, the concept of the good old boys' network appeared frequently in the research. Connell et al. (2015) noted this phenomenon and its effect on female superintendents through their mixed methods study and found that several participants had experienced the negative gatekeeping effects of the good old boys' network, from both the school boards and the communities that the superintendents served.

Alston (1999) explored the experiences of black female superintendents through survey data and found that a contributing barrier to the superintendency was the good old boys' network. The challenge for female aspirants is often lack of access and membership within such groups. It is membership within these types of networks that can provide valuable sponsorship that is often needed to increase visibility and opportunity within organizations. Maienza (1986) found that the good old boys' network worked better for male superintendents to gain sponsorship to the position, and very few women had found success via that route (p. 32). The

good old boys' network was noted as a barrier for the hiring process as well. Vail (1999) as cited in Maienza (1986) noted, "search committees are comprised of men ... former superintendents themselves, and search committee members [who are men] find there may be few opportunities for women to be recommended for open positions" (p. 60).

The good old boys' network often serve as the gatekeepers to the superintendency and can be a major barrier for women who seek the role. Additionally, the notion of the good old boys' network is riddled with issues of power and can limit access for qualified female candidates. Women are placed at a disadvantage in many ways, from lack of sponsorship and visibility (Sánchez & Lehnert, 2018) to the ongoing negative stereotypes that favor male leadership within the superintendency. In addition to the hurdle that the good old boys' network represents for women and their ascension to the superintendency, women also face a lack of mentoring opportunities.

### **Lack of Mentoring**

Mentoring is a relational action between a seasoned practitioner and an aspiring practitioner (Bynum, 2015) and can take the role of informal or formal actions. The importance of mentoring is noted throughout the literature as having a positive impact on leadership (Connell et al., 2015; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014). It is clear that mentoring is a positive enabling factor for those women who have successfully reached the role of superintendent. It is also a barrier for those who have limited access to formal or informal opportunities for mentoring. Bollinger and Grady (2018) conducted a mixed methods study and found that female superintendents often lacked formal mentors on their path to the superintendency. Connell et al. (2015) also conducted a multi level mixed methods study on

women in the superintendency and found that while all the participants noted they had a mentor, only one participant engaged in a formal mentoring program.

Dopp and Sloan (1986) completed a literature review on women in the superintendency which highlighted the importance of mentoring for women in pursuit of the superintendency; however, they found that many mentoring actions were less formal and “ranged from fellow administrators and friends to university professors” (p. 123). Mertz and McNeely (1990) explored the experiences of 20 female principals and superintendents in Tennessee through their descriptive qualitative study and found that only one participant had a mentor. Polka, Litchka and Davis (2009) reported on two studies conducted on women and the superintendency and found the need for mentors as a contributing factor for success for female superintendents. They found that all their participants ranked mentorship as a positive factor essential to their promotion to the superintendency.

Additionally, many of the articles reviewed for this review of literature contained multiple references to the positive effects of mentoring on female leadership, especially for females seeking the superintendency. While there are limited formal opportunities for mentoring noted in much of literature, Muñoz et al. (2018) found encouraging trends in their recent study on mentoring and the superintendency, as nearly 60% of the respondents to their survey research noted that they had an ongoing mentoring relationship that “actively encouraged their aspirations to the superintendency” (p. 288). This is promising evidence of the impact of mentoring; however, the limited access to mentoring for many women still presents a barrier, especially for women of color. Another barrier noted throughout the literature is the concept of career planning, preparation, and mobility.

### **Lack of Career Planning, Over Preparation, and Mobility**

Career planning can benefit those seeking leadership positions, but it is not always a positive factor, and a lack of career planning can often be a barrier for females aspiring to the role of superintendent. Women are often primary caregivers for their families, which can impact their mobility when seeking promotions (Connell et al., 2015). Tallerico (2000b) noted child rearing as a factor for the length of women in teaching roles, which positions them to enter the superintendency later in life than their male counterparts. Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al. (2014) also found that family roles had an impact on the advancement decisions including the decision to delay application to the position of superintendent. Due to familial responsibilities, women often remain in their positions, including those that are not directly “in line” leadership positions such as elementary teacher, elementary principal, or curriculum coordinator much longer than men (Tallerico, 2000b).

Sperandio (2015) explored the career trajectories of women seeking leadership roles and found that women typically advance to the superintendency from a much longer route than their male counterparts. This supports the phenomenon that women often feel the need to be “over qualified” and “over prepared” before venturing into top level leadership positions (Seyfreid & Diamantes, 2005). Evidence that women take a slower pace to the superintendency (Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Tallerico, 2000a) is plentiful throughout the literature reviewed for this dissertation, and often women are not queued up for “in line” leadership positions that lead to the superintendency, nor do they always venture to relocate for such positions (Sperandio, 2015).

## **Overpreparation and Time to the Top**

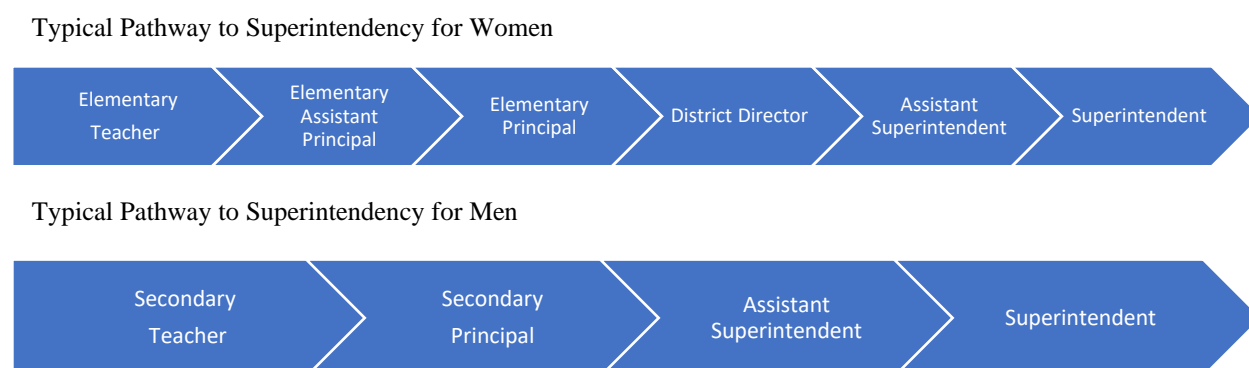
Female superintendent aspirants often have more experience than their male counterparts when they are appointed and enter the superintendency at a later stage in their life (Tallerico, 2000b). The concept of over preparation appeared consistently throughout the literature as a component of career planning (or the lack thereof). Dopp and Sloan (1986) noted that “women superintendents had higher levels of formal education [than their male counterparts]” (p. 122). This is true today, as nearly 69% of all terminal degrees in education are held by women (Perry, 2020). Often, female leaders aim to gather experience and education, and see their trajectory to the superintendency as one that requires specified steps, rather than direct ascension (Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014). Tallerico (2000a) noted that the average age of women entering the superintendency was 52, which is nearly 10 years older than the age of men when they enter the role.

As noted previously, men are far more likely to obtain a superintendent position directly from the principalship, or at least spend much less time in that position, compared to women who spend years obtaining administrative experience. This phenomenon often leads to increased scrutiny from hiring committees, who may judge a woman’s career path and the length of time spent in various roles. Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al. (2014) reexamined data from two previous studies on female school administrators who sought the superintendency and found that women’s career paths to the superintendency were often more harshly scrutinized than male candidates. Tallerico (2000a) confirms this notion as well, as her research on the search process and headhunting for the superintendency noted that school boards and headhunters for districts often look unfavorably at the length of time women spend in specific roles prior to applying to the superintendency.

Another factor in career planning is the trajectory and time it takes for female leaders to reach the top. As noted, women often remain in teaching roles longer than their male counterparts (Connell et al., 2015). Additionally, once they reach “in line” leadership roles such as curriculum director or assistant superintendent, they often stay in those positions longer as well, with female leaders being “40% more likely to have served [in that role] than males” (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). This may be a contributing factor to the former discussion of the need for women to gain all the experience they perceive to be needed before applying for the role of superintendent. Men do not demonstrate such acuity; they often just go for the role despite being prepared or fully qualified (Tallerico, 2000a). Figure 2.2 shows the typical career pathway for female superintendents.

**Figure 2.2**

*Typical Career Pathway for Women and Men in the Superintendency*



From “Career paths and the superintendency: Women speak out” by N. H. Seyfried and T. Diamantes, 2005, *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 3(1), 55–68. “Knowing the community: Women planning careers in educational leadership” by J. Sperandio, 2005, *Planning and Changing*, 46(3/4), 416–427.

This trajectory slows the pace by which female leaders reach the superintendency and is contrasted by the shorter trajectory experienced by male leaders. This may contribute to the age difference between male and female superintendents when they first occupy the position.

Sperandio (2015) noted that there is an average of 10 years between male and female superintendents when they enter the position, with men entering the position earlier in life. This length of time may influence opportunities women have for promotion and may be a contributing factor to the female leadership gap within the superintendency.

To capture the full range of the female experience, I now turn to the experiences of women of color in the superintendency. It is important to note that the plethora of research and literature on women and the superintendency does one of two things: first, the literature often refers to women, but does not specifically call out the different experiences of white women and women of color, and second, the literature is scant on women of color in the superintendency. Therefore, I believe that it is important to address the barriers women of color face on their journey to the superintendency. This tactic is deliberate and intended to fully elucidate the research on women of color in the superintendency but does not assert that the experiences of white women and women of color are transferrable, generalizable, or comparable.

### **Women of Color in the Superintendency**

In the 2020 AASA decennial survey of the state of the superintendency the number of people of color in the superintendency was 8.2% (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021) and women of color make up nearly 12.9% of all the female superintendents (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021, pp. 19–20). These numbers show an increase over previous AASA studies which is a positive trend, and hopeful data. However, it is extremely low and indicative of the challenges women of color face in their aspirations to the superintendency. Despite these menial increases, several structural barriers continue to exist for women of color who seek the role of school superintendent, including the negative effects of gatekeeping (Angel et al., 2013) and limited mentoring opportunities (Alston, 2000, 2005; Angel et al., 2013), there is also the notion of gendered

racism, coined by Essed (1991), which is at play when both gender and race converge within the experiences of women of color.

Alston (2000) highlighted the lack of data on women of color in educational leadership and attributed this to structural biases and dominant hegemonic discourse. Alston, in her essay, pointed out the effect of dominant hegemonic discourse as a contributing factor to the lack of data on women of color in educational leadership. While the 2020 AASA survey highlighted the number of women of color in the role of superintendent (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021), there is not a national database of accurate numbers of current seated superintendents broken down by demographics. Enke (2014) also found limited data on the exact number of females in educational leadership within liberal arts colleges and noted:

Extant studies of women's leadership often have included only white, middle class, heterosexual women and have not illuminated the way that these women's racial/ethnic, class and sexual identities impact their leadership enactment . . . there has been no research on the gendered experiences of leaders at liberal arts colleges. (p. 102)

L. C. Reed (2012) conducted a multi case study of black women in educational leadership through an intersectional lens, looking at the intersections of race and gender on leadership practices for women of color. L. C. Reed utilized intersectionality as a framework for her multi case study and found that participants faced many barriers within their leadership practice, including overt racism and sexism within their school districts. These experiences included not being considered competent based on their race and gender and being the targets of over sexism and veiled racism, which could be deemed experiences of gendered racism.

### **Gendered Racism**

Gendered racism has intersectionality as core to the experience of women of color. Essed (1991) defined gendered racism as:



Sexual racism is a form of gendered racism and cannot, therefore, be discussed separately from gender-specific control of Blacks. The stereotype of sexual availability is the female form of the attribution to Black men of sexual aggressiveness. Both constructions have been and still are used to rationalize the use of aggressive mechanisms of control over Blacks. (p. 251)

Essed's work highlighted the interconnectedness of sexual identity and race, and their role in the current discourse on power and oppression. Additionally, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) explored the experiences of women of color in leadership in their review of literature. They confirmed the existence of multiple barriers such as lack of mentoring and gendered racism. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis underscored the interplay between lived experience and leadership challenges and noted multiple barriers to women of color in leadership, including pay differentials, lack of mentoring opportunities and the negative impact of gendered racism. Sanchez-Hucles expanded on the notion of gendered racism, noting that stereotypes of women of color have a large impact on their leadership opportunities. Jean-Marie et al. (2009) also investigated the impact of gender and racism on women of color in leadership through their narrative inquiry study and found multiple instances of gendered racism within the lived experiences of their participants. Additionally, Macias and Stephens (2019) also applied an intersectional analysis on the effect of gender and race on educational leadership in their review of the discourse on women and leadership. They confirmed the extent of gendered racism on women of color in educational leadership and referenced the role of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2019) as a form of gendered racism within the literature. Microaggressions are daily slights that convey negative attitudes towards one's gender, race, or class (Sue et al., 2019). These subtle instances of racism were prevalent in the experiences of women of color who sought the superintendency. Another barrier to the ascension and promotion of women, including women of color is the notion of gatekeeping.

## Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is the act of power brokering through subtle rules of selection and recruitment, and often makes attainment of high level positions more difficult for women of color (Angel et al., 2013; Ortiz, 2000; Polka et al, 2008). Similar to the meritocratic fallacy that all who are qualified will be rewarded, gatekeeping involves multiple layers of power and control, thus resulting in unwritten selection criteria and rules within the superintendency. Tallerico (2000b) conducted a qualitative case study on women of color and their access to the superintendency and found that the superintendent selection and recruitment process employed by school boards and search firms is riddled with “gates” that keep women of color from accessing the superintendency. In this qualitative case study, several instances of the term “fit” were analyzed and found to be coded language that favors hegemonic candidates such as white males. Throughout Tallerico’s (2000b) analysis of the data, which included semistructured interviews of school board members, search firms and superintendent candidates as well as document analyses (p. 24), were examples of gendered racism that women of color face when applying for the role of superintendent. Tallerico (2000b) summarized their findings:

This study illustrates[s] a complex mix of underwritten selection criteria that shape superintendent search and hiring practices. These criteria are largely invisible because they do not appear in either advertisements of desired qualifications or public forums typically associated with employing a new superintendent. Instead, they manifest themselves behind the scenes, in the private conversations and interviews critical to applicants’ advancement in recruitment and selection process. (p. 37)

The unwritten selection criteria may contribute to the perpetuation of gendered racism that is unspoken and unwritten, however, continually it is often upheld within the systems of power, especially through selection and recruitment.

Angel et al. (2013) explored the experiences of women of color through their phenomenological study on black women who were qualified to apply for a superintendency

(i.e., credentialed and currently employed in “in line” positions within school districts). The authors sought to better understand the lack of Black women superintendents in the south and utilized qualitative interview methods to reveal the impact of their lived experiences on their career paths and choices. The participants in the study discussed the role of political barriers (Angel et al., 2013, p. 605) on their opportunities for advancement. Additionally, the authors also noted, similar to work of Tallerico (2000a), that there were “unwritten employment rules, hidden agendas . . . and concerns with the selection process” (p. 606). For the women in the study, the role of ‘fit’ for the position, coupled with unwritten agendas and selection criteria, served a barrier for ascension to the role of superintendent, despite their high levels of education as all women held doctorate degrees and occupied in line positions such as associate superintendent or assistant superintendent. These challenges worked together as a form of gendered racism and contribute to the barrier’s women of color face in their journey to the superintendency.

### **Lack of Mentoring**

As noted earlier, mentoring has been well documented within the literature as a mitigating factor towards challenges and barriers to the superintendency (Brown, 2014; Grant, 2012; Wallin & Crippen, 2007). Mentoring has also been found to positively enhance career development and psychological safety within organizations (Ashford et al., 2016). However, such opportunities are not always available formally or informally for qualified aspirants, especially for women of color. Currently, while women are more credentialed and hold more doctoral level degrees in education compared to men and, given that women of color outnumber their male counterparts in educational leadership programs (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020c), women and women of color still struggle to obtain the valuable mentors who may assist in their promotion and advancement (Alston, 2000, 2005; Angel et al., 2013). Grant

(2012) explored the role of mentoring on Black female doctoral students within educational leadership programs and found a positive relationship between same gender and same race mentoring on preprofessorial opportunities. In their work, they noted that the benefits of the mentoring experience were exceptionally more profound when doctoral students had mentors that could relate to their personal experience and advocates for mentoring to be engrained within doctoral programs as a positive factor for success.

Alston (2000) wrote in her essay on Black women and the superintendency, about the lack of formal mentoring opportunities for Black women. They noted positive impact of having a mentor for women of color, including obtaining a superintendency and staying in the position (Alston, 1996 as cited in Alston, 2000, p. 529). However, finding a mentor can be difficult for women, especially women of color (Grogan, 2005; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019). This can be a result of many perceived challenges such as access (Ayman & Korabik, 2010), lack of formal mentoring programs (Sánchez & Lehnert, 2019) and the politics of fit and identity (Martin & Chase, 2017). Brown (2014) explored the recruitment and retention of Black female superintendents in their phenomenological narrative study and found the role of social politics and the lack of mentoring as a challenge for female leaders of color. However, all the participants within their study noted the importance of establishing networks and having a solid mentor as a positive factor to obtaining the superintendency (Brown, 2014, p. 582).

The positive impact of mentoring has widely been shown to increase the visibility of candidates and mitigate the negative effects of gatekeeping. However, the literature has noted the challenge women and women of color face in obtaining a mentor, despite the positive results that such relationships may yield (Mertz & McNeely, 1990; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Barriers to mentoring often include lack of formal mentoring programs and limited access to

effective mentors (Alston, 2000). Additionally, the role of organizational politics and the unwritten rules of “fit” may also be a factor for the lack of formal and informal mentoring. Alston noted that for women of color “mentoring relationships are bound by another set of criteria” (p. 529) and such criteria may limit their access to the valuable, positive impact of mentoring for the superintendency.

### **Intersectionality and the Superintendency**

The literature on the role of intersectionality as it relates to the superintendency appears to be limited. This is similar to the overall limited published research on diversity within the superintendency. Given the hegemonic perspectives of leadership and the gendered nature of the superintendency (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Kim & Brunner, 2009), it is not surprising that this is the case. However, those researchers who have explored the experiences of women of color and the superintendency often touch on issues of intersectionality, even if they do not explicitly use intersectionality as a stated theoretical framework.

Brunner is frequently cited for her research on women in the role of superintendent spanning from the late 1990s to mid 2000s; however, much of her research has been focused on gender with limited mentions of race. However, in 2008, Brunner addressed the misgivings of the 2000 AASA decennial survey report (Glass et al., 2000) in terms of underrepresentation of women and women of color through her analysis of the study’s use of data. Brunner’s (2008) acknowledgement and analysis of the 2000 AASA report demonstrates the impact of gender and race on the mainstream, hegemonic discourse. Brunner (2008) noted the following:

Discourse about the superintendency establishes the norms or standards of the position as it is constructed in texts and in the minds of others, and discourse that is generated from the AASA study remains constricted by the voices, views, experiences and standards of White men. (p. 665)

This insight into the hegemonic discourse in the field, including the contributions as a researcher and the imperative to bring light to the use of data and the stories that live within, points to the intersections of gender and race, thus intersectionality. While Brunner does not name intersectionality as a framework for her analysis, her analysis is laden with the concept. Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) examined narrative and archival data and employed “co-constructed dialogue” (p. 537) analysis based on an interview with a Black female superintendent in the Midwest.

Another research pair, Agosto and Roland (2018) conducted a complex discourse analysis utilizing structured analysis of extant literature on intersectionality and educational leadership for the years spanning 2005 to 2017, that utilized a criterion based review process including inter researcher reflexive coding and analysis of the discourse (Agosto & Roland, 2018). They found the current research on intersectionality and educational leadership was primarily focused on the micro level interactions and not within the larger, macro level factors that may be useful for the field. Additionally, they were critical of the genealogical references for intersectionality and found that many research articles were less likely to utilize attributions with accuracy, thus making the recommendation for what they termed “conceptual acuity” (p. 279). Given the varied use of intersectionality as praxis and as a research method, the author’s posited continued implementation of intersectionality within educational leadership studies.

### **Positive Enabling Factors**

In addition to the large amount of literature on the barriers and challenges women face in their journey to the superintendency, several themes of positive enabling factors also appeared. These themes included the importance of mentoring (Connell et al., 2015; Slick & Gupton, 1993), networking (Connell et al., 2015; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Muñoz, Pankake, &

Ramalho et al., 2014), and resilience (Kelsey et al., 2014; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014). Mentoring appeared as both a scant resource and as a positive enabling factor for success for women in leadership. Much of the literature hailed the positive benefits of mentoring, in both the formal and informal sense (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Connell et al., 2015; Dopp & Sloan, 1986; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Kim & Brunner, 2009). In addition to the positive impact of mentoring, the positive effects of networking (Connell et al., 2015; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014), and the role of resilience (Kelsey et al., 2014; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014) emerged as positive and contributing factors for the success of female superintendents and aspirants.

### **Mentoring**

While lack of mentoring was addressed in much of the literature as a barrier to success for women as they seek the superintendency, I found multiple mentions of mentoring as a positive enabling factor for success. Slick and Gupton (1993) highlighted the importance of mentoring as a support system for female aspirants and noted that both men and women can provide equal mentoring support to women who seek the superintendency. Bynum (2015) also argued that the role of mentoring, either formal or informal, can be utilized as a measure capable of closing the female leadership gap in the superintendency. Additional research supported mentoring as a positive factor and as a means of increasing female representation in the superintendency. Kelsey et al. (2014) found that participants in their study of 20 female superintendents, mentoring arose as a theme for success in the role.

Muñoz, Pankake, and Ramalho et al. (2014) also explored the notion of mentoring in their mixed methods research and found that just over half of their participants had engaged favorable mentoring experience. This is echoed in other literature reviewed as well, such as the

work of Connell et al. (2015), who purported the benefits of mentoring, either formal or informal. In their mixed methods research, they found multiple instances of informal mentoring, and all participants noted the positive benefits of a mentor on their career success. As a result of their research, Connell et al. (2015) made the recommendation for further study on the benefits of mentoring and the creation of more formal mentoring pipelines. Another positive enabling factor in addition to the benefits of mentoring was the concept of networking, which appeared throughout the literature.

### **Networking**

The importance of networking has been described in numerous sources as a method to combat the barrier of gatekeepers (Connell et al., 2015; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al., 2014) and to break through the good old boys' network. In the cannon of literature reviewed for this paper, the concept of networking appeared as both a hinderance, in the form of a lack of networking opportunities, and as a positive enabling factor for success. For example, Bollinger and Grady (2018) highlighted the positive nature of networking and made the following suggestion to encourage females to seek the superintendency:

One way to do this may be to encourage networking opportunities for current superintendents with women who currently hold other administrative positions or aspire to the superintendency. Providing opportunities for current superintendents to tell their stories will allow them to share their experiences and the rewards of being a superintendent. (pp. 65–66)

Additionally, Kim and Brunner (2009) referenced their previous study that found that 39% of women in their study believed that lack of professional networks was a barrier to the superintendency, compared to only seven percent of males (p. 309). This is a stark difference between opportunities presented to men and women and exemplifies the challenges women face



in breaking into the good old boys' network. Connell et al. (2015) found that networks are a positive factor for the success of female superintendents and identified that formal networks such as professional organizations provided female leaders with opportunities to "expand their knowledge, skills, influence and recognition" (p. 49). Additionally, Alston (2000) highlighted the specific challenges women of color face obtaining membership within networks along with the positive benefits of networking.

Several authors focused on networking as a main contributor to the success and sought to better understand the access to networks as a positive factor, while other sources examined the lack of networking as a barrier to success (Polka et al., 2008; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005). In their content analysis of dissertation research, Gresham and Sampson (2019) identified the theme of networking as it appeared in dissertations and found that networking as a support system appeared in 70% of the dissertations. However, lack of networking appeared as a barrier to leadership in the dissertations, and they found that most professional networking was sought after appointment to the superintendency (Gresham & Sampson, 2019, p. 265). In a positive light, Kelsey et al. (2014) took an appreciative approach in their research and found that membership in professional organizations was a positive factor for success, with nearly all participants describing membership in professional organizations as a component of their success in the role. Overall, networking can be a positive enabling factor for success of females in leadership.

## **Resilience**

Resiliency also appeared frequently within the literature. Polka et al. (2008) defined resilience as the ability to cope with challenges and explored the concept of resilience as an important skill for successful leaders (p. 305). In their research on the superintendency, the

looked closely at the role that resilience plays in successful leadership and defined resiliency as a positive skill that encompasses such concepts as personal efficacy, positive attitudes, and the ability to “remain true to personal values” (p. 307). They recommended that focus be placed on the value of developing resilient leaders through formal programs designed specifically to build these skills in female leaders (Polka et al., 2008).

Edson (1987) completed a longitudinal study of aspiring female administrators including principals and superintendents from 1979 to 1986. While the study did not specifically name resiliency as a positive factor, the author described multiple actions and situations where the participants demonstrated resilient behaviors on their road to leadership. While Edson’s work was published nearly 40 years ago, the sentiments of the participants remain relevant today. Edson did not identify these comments as indicative of resiliency, most likely because of the age of the research, as it was written at time when resiliency was less studied in mainstream literature. In their more current content analysis, Gresham and Sampson (2019) found six dissertations and 14 mentions on resiliency and female superintendents. Additionally, Kelsey et al. (2014) recommended a deeper look at resiliency for female leaders as an outcome of their study. When looking at the career pathway from central district office positions, Muñoz, Pankake, & Ramalho et al. (2014) also found resilience to be a positive enabling factor for women seeking the superintendency, and made the following recommendation:

It is essential, whether through personal development or program preparation, women increase their levels of resilience if they are to persist in securing a first position as superintendent. Resilience becomes even more important to women as they face the realities of being dismissed from the superintendency. The ability to ‘bounce back’ and move on as is more commonly the case for men in the superintendency and must be developed in women if any kind of parody for women as superintendents is to be achieved. (p. 780)

Resilience as positive enabling factor for the success of female leaders is an area that is somewhat underdeveloped within the literature, especially in terms of women and the superintendency. In the literature reviewed for this chapter, there were promising stories of resilience, even if resilience was not the main research question. It was through the stories of the women aspirants and superintendents that the notion of resilience emerged as a positive factor for success.

### **Integration of Sensitizing Concepts**

As noted, this dissertation aims to better understand how women experience the superintendent selection process, particularly those women who make it to the final round of selection for school superintendent positions but do not get selected. Exploring the current literature in terms of the macro, meso, and micro level influences elucidated several sensitizing concepts, including the impact of macro level influences such as systemic and structural racism and sexism. Additionally, I have explored the influence of leadership mental models and several meso level barriers such as overt sexism, the good old boys' network, and gatekeeping. Additionally, this review of literature has explored the micro level influences, both positive and negative, on women's aspirations and attainment of the superintendency, including lack of mentoring opportunities and their positive impact and the amazing resilience of women who do reach the top.

It is clear that diversity within the superintendency is a true problem for America's public school systems. Despite the small increases in women and women of color in the position, there continues to be a female leadership gap. This chapter has illustrated, through a look at the macro, meso, and micro levels, the landscape of research on women and the superintendency. Furthermore, this chapter sheds light on the experiences of women of color and the intersectional

nature of the superintendency, as issues of race, gender, and leadership converge in the experiences of women who seek the role. As a white feminist researcher, I understand the importance of inclusive practices and the inherent power that I possess within my research praxis and aimed to elucidate the current research, also with a focus on women of color, in effort to distinctly recognize that the experiences of white women are not necessarily indicative of all women.

By unveiling the macro level influences and the micro level barriers and positive enabling factors, I have set forth a clear description of the sensitizing concepts for this dissertation. Given that this study is based on constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014), the literature review provides the basic sensitizing concepts prior to enacting the research. These sensitizing concepts created the basis for my thinking of women and the superintendency; however, they are not the endpoint. As I became fully engaged in the generation of data (Birks & Mills, 2015), I noted various concepts as they emerged and worked with my librarian to find further research that is noted and utilized in Chapter's IV and V.

### **Summary**

The school superintendency is a complicated position, with multiple challenges and pressures, and several obstacles for attainment faced by women who seek the role. Despite incremental improvements in diversity within the role, America's superintendents continue to be overwhelmingly white and male. Increasing academic accountability for school districts and the plethora of complex challenges including unfunded mandates, high stakes testing, and a diverse student population require modern, collaborative, and transformational practices from those who serve in the role. Much of the literature reviewed for this chapter highlighted the various

challenges and barriers from a macro, meso, and micro level, and illustrated the complex landscape women face as they seek the position.

The literature is replete with evidence power and domination, and the superintendency remains a primarily male role. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, even though much of the research that confirms the benefits of diversity and transformational leadership practices. Our public school districts continue to be led by leaders who fit the hegemonic norm, and the systems by which superintendents are recruited and selected also continue to perpetuate the advancement of white, male leaders. Additionally, multiple barriers at the meso level serve as roadblocks to the promotion of women, especially women of color to the role. From a critical feminist perspective, it is not only these meso level barriers, such as gatekeepers and lack of mentorship, but also larger, political, and structural issues such as gendered racism, that must be addressed to pave way for women, especially women of color, to gain access to the highest leadership position within schools.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Methodological choice for research is directly influenced by the research question and, often, the researcher's aim (Birks & Mills, 2015; J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018). Unlike other qualitative research methodologies such as phenomenology or narrative inquiry, the purpose of grounded theory is the development of midrange or substantive theory (Birks & Mills, 2015; J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018; J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). This dissertation's research question focused on the superintendent search process and the experiences of women who make it to the final round of selection for school superintendent positions but do not get selected. Grounded theory was used for this study and was an appropriate methodological fit, as this study did not seek to merely describe the experiences of women who aspired to the superintendency, but rather, to develop a mid level theory regarding the interactions of the superintendent candidate and the search committee.

Birks and Mills (2015) purported that grounded theory is appropriate whenever there “[are] areas where little is known about a particular topic” (p. 17) and posited that its purpose is to “generate theory that explains a phenomenon of interest to the researcher” (p. 18). As Locke (2007) noted:

As a methodological style, grounded theory emphasizes the generation of theory. This is a distinctive feature to grounded theory as compared to both hypothetico-deductive conception of theory testing and to some more descriptively oriented approaches in qualitative and ethnographic research. (p. 585)

I certainly considered other methodological approaches for my dissertation question, including narrative inquiry; however, narrative inquiry seeks to tell the individual story or stories of participants from their world view and applies a theoretical framework to explain the phenomenon (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). Indeed, much of the research on women and the superintendency has done just that: it has explored and shared their stories, their firsthand

experiences of the position, and the numerous challenges women have faced in pursuit of the job (See Chapter II). Grounded theory as a methodological choice provided a lofty opportunity for my research question and was the most appropriate fit for my research aims.

### **Grounded Theory Methodology**

Grounded theory was developed through the work of Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, in response to methodological tensions in social sciences and in an effort to break from the traditional, positivist approach that focused on controlled, scientific research (Charmaz, 2007). In 1967, Glaser and Strauss published their pivotal text *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, which provided new methods for developing emergent theories that were grounded in data. Based on their study of death and dying within the hospital setting, Glaser and Strauss posited a new way of engaging in field research and data analysis and pushed the field of social research into a new direction, one that encouraged the emergence of new theory through engagement with data (Charmaz, 2007; Stern, 2009).

Glaser and Strauss were pioneers in sociological research within the field and were influenced by their varied background and experience with social science fieldwork and the symbolic interactionism of Mead (Morse et al., 2009). Their position was one that placed the researcher squarely within the context of the field, and in the late 1960s Glaser and Strauss were caught between a changing landscape of sociological research; one that was conflicted between quantitative and positivist viewpoints and the qualitative world of social processes and experiences (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), “Glaser and Strauss’s book made a cutting edge statement because it punctured notions of methodological consensus and offered systematic strategies for qualitative research practice” (p. 7). This signaled a change in the approach to sociological research and provided a set of methods, albeit sometimes ambiguous, to

implement grounded theory. These direct processes and methods were Glaser and Strauss's means of validating and establishing credibility for qualitative research during an era that favored positivist research.

Through their work, Glaser and Strauss solidified what has become a widely utilized qualitative research methodology (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was through their systematic approach to qualitative research, that was "ordered, systematic, and marked by rigor" (Stern, 2009, p. 25). Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocated for credibility in qualitative research, hence rigor, in their methods and referred to the concept of "multiple comparison groups" (p. 231). The use of multiple groups, according to Glaser and Strauss, increase credibility of the developing theory.

This approach to qualitative research required the researcher to engage in what is now known as constant comparative interactions with the data and a complex use of memoing (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Despite the groundbreaking work of Glaser and Strauss, the research pair split ways by the late 1970s and took their research interests in separate directions, however, "they remained fast friends" (Stern, 2009, p. 27). This split took the two on diverse paths, and ultimately separately influenced branches of grounded theory, through their refinement of their methods and that of their graduate students who became known as the second generation of grounded theorists (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Stern, 2009).

### **Straussian, Glaserian, and Constructivist Grounded Theory**

After the split between Glaser and Strauss, Strauss went on to influence the work of Leonard Schatzman, who is known for his work with dimensional analysis (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009). The two had met prior to Glaser and Strauss's book, when Schatzman was a graduate student under Strauss, and Schatzman's dimensional analysis techniques were



“developed at least in part as a response to what Schatzman saw as limitations of early grounded theory” (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009, p. 90). While at the University of California San Francisco, Schatzman’s work supported students of Strauss, and his expansion of analysis techniques are utilized throughout the second generation of ground theory scholars has had a lasting impact on the field (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009). Furthermore, Schatzman and Strauss published, in 1973, the text *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology*, which details the layers of analysis used in dimensional analysis.

Kathy Charmaz was a student of Strauss and Glaser (Charmaz, 2009; Morse et al., 2009). Her work was influenced by both scholars, and they added another, more ecological lens to grounded theory methodology. In what they coined constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz noted that their approach “represents a constellation of methods” (Charmaz, 2009, p. 128).

Charmaz further explained in their essay in *Developing Grounded Theory*;

Constructivist grounded theory assumes that we produce knowledge by grappling with empirical problems. Knowledge rests on social constructions. We construct research processes and products, but these constructions occur under preexisting structural conditions, arise in privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations. All these conditions inherent in the research situation but in most studies remain unmentioned or are completely ignored. Which observations we make, how we make them, and the views that we form of them reflect these conditions as do our subsequent grounded theories. Constructivists realize that conducting and writing research are not neutral acts. (p. 130)

Taking the constructivist epistemological viewpoint, Charmaz posited that the researcher engages with the data and thus, constructs knowledge; there is no objective stance in conducting qualitative research. This is divergent from the more positivist stance Glaser took, which was rooted in his early descriptive statistical ontology (Charmaz, 2009; Morse et al., 2009).

Charmaz’s constructivist viewpoint is echoed by Cunliffe’s (2011) notion of intersubjectivity, where the researcher and the participant are cocreators of meaning.

Charmaz's argued that "objectivist and grounded theory are on two ends of a continuum" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 137) and her methods advocated a marriage of sorts between the rigid, rigorous methods of Glaser and the constructivist leanings of Strauss. This makes sense, as Charmaz integrated the methods from Glaser's positivist roots and Strauss's pragmatic approaches with her refinement of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2007). Today, constructivist grounded theory "adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent and open ended approach of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original statement" (p. 12).

This introductory review of grounded theory history and its advancement through ongoing application demonstrates the iterative process that is inherent within this methodology. Researchers continue to apply grounded theory within the context of social science research, and as a methodology, grounded theory continues to give back to the field, through the useful generation of applicable and substantive theory.

### **Grounded Theory Methods**

Grounded theory is a quite popular qualitative methodology (Birks & Mills, 2015). This holds true for doctoral dissertations as well, with 13,016 grounded theory dissertations published on ProQuest in the last 10 years (ProQuest search). These numbers demonstrate that many doctoral students have found grounded theory to be an appropriate methodological fit for their research question. I will describe grounded theory methods as a foundation and rationale for understanding the methodology, prior to describing my study design. Additionally, I have provided insights that I gleaned from implementing a pilot study carried out prior to this dissertation. Traditional research standards place emphasis on reliability, generalizability, validity, and objectivity (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018; Toma, 2011). Grounded theory, as a qualitative methodology, approaches rigor in a slightly different, yet focused, manner and is

deeply aligned to grounding research squarely within the data (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, I believe that a detailed description of grounded theory methods coupled with the study design and methods employed in this dissertation ensures a level of rigor for the study.

### **Purposeful Sample**

The grounded theory study seeks to understand, “What is going on here?” (Schatzman, 1992, p. 310). Unlike other qualitative methodologies, grounded theory often utilizes what is known as a purposeful sample. J. W. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted a purposeful sample requires “all participants [to] have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 157). For this study, the participants must have experienced getting to the final round of superintendent interviews and not have been offered the position.

In addition, grounded theory requires consideration of theoretical sampling. Corbin and Strauss (2008) described theoretical sampling as “a method of data collection based on concepts derived from data” (p. 114). This makes projecting the need for theoretical changes to the initial sample unknown at the onset of this study. However, it is important to note that a solid, rigorous, grounded theory study will include the concept of theoretical sampling (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

### **Data Gathering**

The data gathering stage occurs once a purposeful sample has been identified and the researcher(s) are set to begin the actual study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) contended that all forms of data pertaining to the phenomenon must be considered, including data generated outside of fieldwork (i.e., interviews) and argued that strong data can be found within documents and other artifacts. Charmaz (2014) also championed data gathering, noting;

Your research adventure begins with finding and generating data. Discover how exciting empirical research can be through gathering rich data. Let the world appear anew through your data. Gathering rich data will give you solid material for building a significant analysis. Rich data are detailed, focused and full. They reveal participants' views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the context and structures of their lives . . . Researchers generate strong grounded theories with rich data. (p. 23)

This notion of rich data lends overall credibility to the grounded theory study and is a cornerstone of the methodology. It is essential that a quality study be grounded in rich data (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Gathering data can take on many modalities as well. It can be from direct interviews, documents, observations, written responses, and more recently, through online posts and other forums (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). It is important to note that data collecting and the process of coding and memoing are intertwined; they happen simultaneously. This is a core principle of the grounded theory methodology and central to the notion of grounding theory within the data (Charmaz, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967;).

### **Coding and Memoing**

Coding is the process of identifying concepts that emerge from the data, and in the case of grounded theory, begins at the onset of data collection (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). Over the various interpretations of grounded theory methods, authors have utilized several concepts related to the coding process. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) addressed the various iterations and the history of coding within grounded theory methods and noted that the original coding paradigms of Glaser and Strauss were “far from perfect” (p. 18). More recent grounded theorists apply what is known as initial coding at the onset of the data collection process (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018). Charmaz’s (2012) work relies heavily on the initial coding in conjunction with a continual, or constant, process in which the researcher is closely engaged with the data.

Another concept relevant to constructivist grounded theory methods, such as those championed by Charmaz, is the process of coding in actions. This may look like a more active language, for example, using gerunds, and coding line by line segments directly from the action of the participant (Charmaz, 2014). This method of engaging with the data keeps the researcher grounded within the data. This is a key concept and relevant to conducting a methodologically rigorous study and has been considered in the development of this dissertation proposal and the proposed research design. It is also a key component of the constant comparative process and cycle that is germane to grounded theory.

It is important to note the importance of memoing within a grounded theory study. Researchers utilizing grounded theory must, starting at the beginning, engage in the writing of memos to document the research process (Birks & Mills, 2015). The use of memoing as a record for methodological decision making provides a level of trustworthiness and adds rigor to the process. Charmaz (2014) advocated for ongoing memoing and suggested that fledgling researchers put time and care in to developing their memo style and to make a routine of reflection and memoing. The use of memos throughout the research study also provides a level of credibility and as Glaser and Strauss (1967) posited, “an immediate illustration of an idea” (p. 108). Thus, the use of memoing for this research study was vital to the overall design and a cornerstone of the process.

### **Constant Comparative Process**

Glaser and Strauss introduced the notion of the constant comparative process, one that situates the research in the middle of the data and engages with continual comparisons at each step of the analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In their seminal work, they discuss at length the difference between traditional social science research, which focused on gathering data and

then analyzing it in one fell swoop *after* collection. The constant comparative process is exactly opposite of a more traditional positivist approach. In a constant comparative process, the researcher takes small bits of the data and then, through deep analysis, and what Charmaz (2014) argued as the process of making “analytic sense of the material” (p. 132), the researcher continually compares concepts as they emerge from within the data. It is important to note as researchers gather, or as grounded theory methodologist term *generate* data, they must stay closely grounded within the analysis of the data and the concepts and categories that are revealed from within the data. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) further the notion of the constant comparative process as one of refinement and elaboration, and noted, “[the] constant comparative method [is] a method of analysis that generates successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category to concept” (p. 607). Central to the methods of grounded theory, the constant comparative method is a way of engaging with the data and the concepts that unfurl from within the data. The process of continually working with the data and documenting the emerging categories is key to the notion of constant comparative processes.

### **Saturation, Dimensions, and Explanatory Matrices**

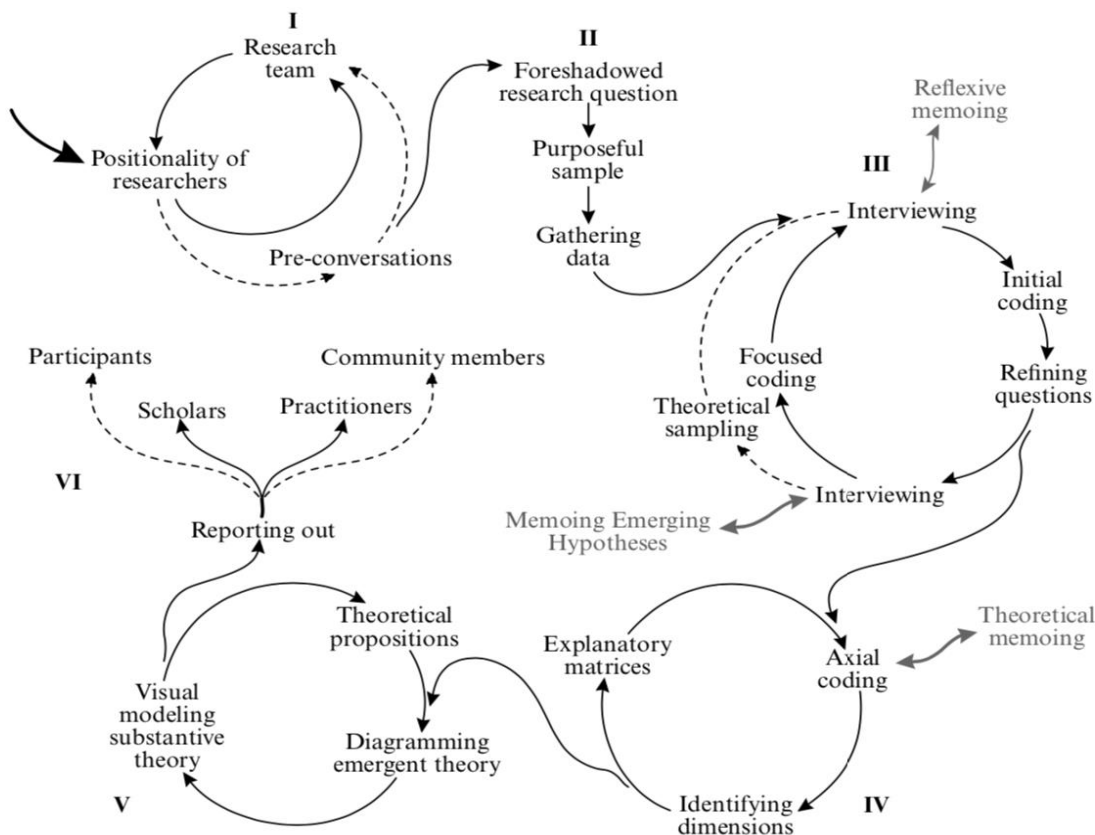
Another source of apprehension for the neophyte researcher who is set on conducting a grounded theory study is the concept of theoretical saturation. The first thought, and one that ruminates within my planning, is how much data should be generated? When does the researcher know they have enough data? This is a common grounded theory method question and has been addressed by many authors. Theoretical saturation is described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) as “when no new categories or relevant themes are emerging” (p. 148). However, they argue that it takes finesse and methodological decision making as well, as a “researcher could go on

collecting data forever” (p. 149), and thus, it is important for the researcher to determine when saturation has been met for practical and pragmatic purposes. When enough categories have emerged and no new concepts are evolving, the researcher can confidently determine that saturation has been achieved.

As discussed, Schatzman extended grounded theory by adding dimensional analysis (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009). In Figure 3.1, Holloway and Schwartz (2018) depicted the grounded theory process and methods. As depicted in step IV, once coding has occurred, the researcher then engages in a process of identifying dimensions.

**Figure 3.1**

*Holloway and Schwartz, Phases of Grounded Theory Research Process*



*Note:* The dotted lines represent those instances when the researcher determines the relevance of including these activities in the research process. The greyed text represents the researcher's reflective journaling of the ongoing analytic process. The Roman numerals reference the phases of action in the research process.

From "Drawing from the margins: Grounded theory research design in EDI studies" by E. Holloway and H. Schwartz 2018, in L.A.E. Boosyen, R. Bendi, & K. Pringle (Eds.), *Handbook of research methods in diversity management, equity, and inclusion at work*, Edgar. Reprinted with permission.

These dimensions are the sinew that binds and holds concepts together and emerge from the data as they are analyzed and connected (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018), thus elucidating what Bowers and Schatzman (2009) described as the "complexity of social life" (p. 103). As complexities arise from within the data, the explanatory matrix assists researchers in organizing



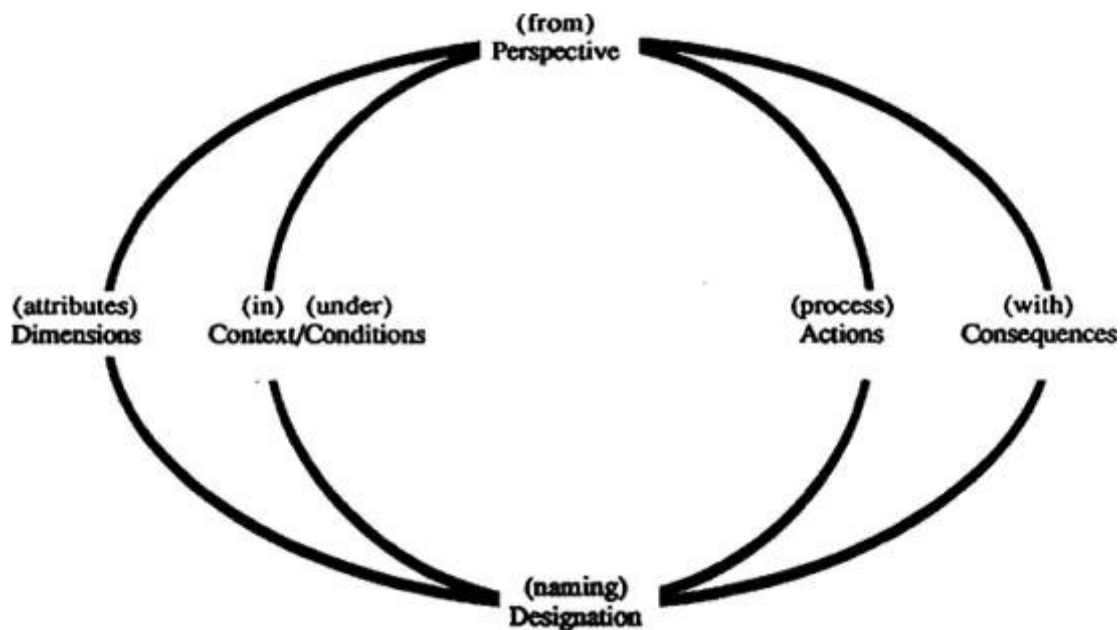
the data into various dimensions (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018). According to Kools et al. (1996) the explanatory matrix as originally intended by Schatzman,

Represents an organizational prototype that further differentiates the innate characteristics of identified dimensions into various conceptual components such as context, conditions, process (actions and interactions), or consequences. In configuring the explanatory matrix, the researcher seeks to select from among the dimensions assembled the central dimension that provides the most fruitful explanation of the phenomenon. (p. 318)

Kools et al. (1996) presented a visual model of the interactions between the narrowing and connecting of the dimensions into what Schatzman (1986 as cited in Kools et al., 1996) referred to as perspective. This action requires an interplay between the researcher's reflexivity and connection to their own experiences and recognition of what is happening within the data. Holloway and Schwartz (2018) described this as the point when researchers are "beginning to make up their own personal theory about what it is that happens" (p. 519). The use of an explanatory matrix is a visual method that supports the researchers expanding understanding of the context, conditions, processes, and actions as they emerge from the data. Figure 3.2 represents the explanatory matrix which is a reinterpretation of Schatzman's original methods with the work of Melia (2011).

**Figure 3.2**

*Diagram of the Explanatory Matrix*



From *Grounded theory: Evolving methods* (p.6) by Melia, K. M. 2011 in P. Atkinson & S. Delamont (Eds.), *SAGE Qualitative Research Methods*, SAGE Publications. Reprinted with permission.

It is important to emphasize the role of dimensional analysis as part of constructivist grounded theory. The creation of an explanatory matrix provides the researcher with a dynamic framework to make sense of what is going on with the data and their subsequent categories and dimensions. After all, the goal with any grounded theory study is to generate substantive theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse, 2009).

### **Modeling and Substantive Theory**

Finally, the use of visual modeling, or what Birks and Mills (2015) have coined illustrative models, are the visual representations of the findings within a grounded theory study. This is a newer interpretation of what was previously discussed as diagramming (Charmaz, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Urquhart, 2007). Holloway and Schwartz (2018) included both the

process of diagramming through the constant comparative process, with a distinction for the final visual model being a representation of the substantive theory. Birks and Mills (2015) did not make such a distinction, and rather provided guidance on the use of illustrative models for the final presentation of theory. This agrees with the notion that the final theory is credible and as Holloway and Schwartz (2018) noted, “relevant to practice” (p. 522). The visual model helps the researcher represent their substantive theory in accompaniment with the storyline or dimensional progression of the developed theory.

The visual representation, whether referred to as a diagram, or as illustrative representation to use the newer terminology, is the researchers’ model of their discovered substantive theory. J. W. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined substantive level theory as:

A low-level theory that is applicable to immediate situations. This theory evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated in ‘one particular situational context’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 174). Researchers differentiate this form of theory from theories of greater abstraction and applicability, called midlevel theories, grand theories, or formal theories. (p. 318)

The goal of grounded theory research is to develop a useful and meaningful theory within the context of the problem and related to situations and human processes. Such was the aim of this dissertation; to discover and unearth just what is going on within the context of superintendent selection and the women who seek the position from the micro level. The historical context of grounded theory and the methods required provided a foundational methodological background for this study. Below is a detailed description of the study design, including the purposeful sample and sampling techniques used, data collection processes including storage specifications and privacy assurances, interviewing techniques that I employed, coding of the data and the use of Dedoose software, and my constant comparative methods including ongoing memoing and interaction with the data.

## **Study Design**

This study aimed to better understand the experience of the women who make it to the final round of selection for school superintendent positions but do not get selected for the position. As a constructivist grounded theory study, it was important to clearly define the purposeful sampling methods, including the criteria for selection and participant recruitment strategies, data generation methods, my detailed coding process including my work with the coding team, and memoing process. Furthermore, I have included details on the technical specifications and data storage methods used and ethical considerations used in this study.

### **Purposeful Sample, Criteria, and Recruitment Strategy**

Given my research question and the specific and purposeful criteria set for participants, I was explicit in defining the purposeful sample. Participants needed to meet the defined criteria to participate. This included identification as women and having the experience of applying for and getting to the final round of superintendent selection but not getting an offer for the job. Participants were recruited through the use of state and national professional organizations and through a network snowball recruitment process. I aimed to get a varied sample of between 16 to 30 participants (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018), with a total of 18 participants in the final sample. Snowball sampling techniques utilized existing networks to assist in the recruitment of possible participants for the study (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018), and proved to be somewhat successful in this endeavor. I was able to engage several state and national professional organizations who sent out my recruitment materials to their membership. This action yielded the most participants and added to the geographical diversity of the purposeful sample. Additionally, I attempted to utilize my own personal network through the use of LinkedIn, which did not prove to be as fruitful in identifying participants, as only one participant was identified through this process. I

also asked participants if they could assist by recommending my study to a colleague; this yielded one participant.

The first step in my recruitment process began with defining the criteria for the target population (Daniel, 2012). My research aim required specific criteria for participation in the study, including the following:

- Participants must identify as women
- Participants must have applied for at least one superintendent position
- Participants must have participated in final round interviews
- Participants may not have been appointed to the position in the final round
- Participants may have been appointed later through another interview process
- Participants may or may not currently be sitting superintendents

These criteria were methodologically aligned to the method of purposeful sampling. Davis (2012) defined purposeful sampling as:

A nonprobability sampling procedure in which elements are selected from the target population based on their fit with the purpose of the study and specific inclusion and exclusion criteria . . . unlike availability sampling, purposeful sampling elements are not selected simply because of their availability, convenience, or self-selection. Instead, the researcher purposely selects the elements because they satisfy specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation in the study. (pp. 87–88)

These criteria were specific to the goal of the study and purposefully aligned to the research question. As noted above, I also used snowball sampling techniques through my professional networks and through the participants themselves. Snowball sampling is often used in qualitative research as a method of recruiting possible participants from existing networks or, as J. W. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “people who know people” (p. 159). The recruitment process required several recruitment documents, including recruitment materials and a study announcement, which was shared within my professional affiliates and was sent to various state

and national organizations. In the end, the several organizations sent out my recruitment flyer to their membership, either via direct emails or in their monthly newsletter. Table 3.1 highlights the organizations who participated and supported my recruitment strategies.

**Table 3.1**

*Organizations Who Assisted with Recruitment*

<b>Name of Organization</b>	<b>Method of Recruitment</b>
Iowa Association of School Administrators	Direct email to membership
School Superintendents of Alabama	Direct email to membership
Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators	Inclusion in monthly newsletter
Texas Education Agency	Direct email to membership
Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents	Direct email to membership
Minnesota School Boards Association	Inclusion in monthly newsletter
Florida Association of School Administrators	Direct email to membership
American Association of School Administrators	Collaborative support with state associations
Virginia Association of School Superintendents	Direct email to membership

I also created specific recruitment emails to be sent to potential participants. The administrative tasks associated with recruitment efforts proved to be immense. To aid with this task, I used a data spreadsheet to record a variety of steps in this process. This spreadsheet morphed from an overall scheduling log into the backbone of my research process and was an invaluable tool for keeping me organized throughout the process.

The Antioch University Institutional Review Board approved my recruitment strategy prior to interviewing any participants and a sample of the recruitment flyer, language for LinkedIn, and the recruitment letter are included in Appendices C, D, and E of this dissertation. I gained informed consent of participants via Survey Monkey, which included detailed information on the purpose of the study, and any potential benefits or harm associated with their participation. I included a brief demographic section within the Survey Monkey to gather

pertinent information about the participants. Combining the informed consent and demographic survey proved to be an expeditious method. Furthermore, participants had option of removing themselves from the process at any time and were informed both verbally and in writing. Prior to each interview, I gained verbal consent and offered the participants the option to withdrawal from participation. No participant chose to withdrawal.

### **Demographic Information**

While the selection criteria for participants was specific, as discussed, it is also was important to consider inclusive demographic participation in terms of race, age, and geographic location. Because of this, I employed the concept of *maximum variation sampling*. This method of sampling falls within nonprobability sampling methods, like purposeful sampling and required efforts to expand sampling to a wide range of participants in order to obtain the most variations within the sample (Schwandt, 2011). While I used a purposeful sample, I also ensured a wide range of participants by utilizing the state network organizations. Throughout the study, I worked closely with my methodologist to continually assess the demographics of participants. This resulted in a varied and purposeful sample of participants in the study. Within days of the first recruitment email, interested participants began to reply with enthusiasm. Over the course of several months, a wide range of participants were scheduled and interviewed. The range of age, race/ethnicity, marital status, geographic location, number of superintendent interviews, educational level, and current roles were quite varied and are described at the onset of Chapter IV.

### **Data Generation Methods**

The main data generation method for this study was interviewing. The interview is a crucial component in grounded theory methods and often is the main form of data utilized

(Charmaz, 2014). As I employed constructivist grounded theory methods, the interviewing techniques I used looked different from other qualitative studies. Typical qualitative studies, such as narrative inquiry or phenomenology, utilize a more structured approach to interviewing. This is not the case in a grounded theory study. According to Charmaz (2014):

Constructivist grounded theorists attend to the situation and construction of the interview, the construction of the research participant's story and silences, and the interviewer-participant relationship as well as the explicit context of the interview (Charmaz, 2009c as cited in Charmaz, 2014). What participants do not say can be as telling as what they do say. A constructivist perspective differs from conceptions of the interview as either a mirror of reality or a mere account served up to answer a question. A constructivist approach views interviews as emergent interactions in which social bonds may develop . . . In this sense, the interview becomes more than a performance. Instead, it is the site of exploration, emergent understandings, legitimation of identity, and validation of experience. (p. 91)

The constructivist approach to interviewing requires the researcher to remain open to what unfurls within the interview, and there is no prescribed set of interview questions. The dialogue during a constructivist grounded theory interview is conversational in nature and often adjusts depending on the unfolding story (Charmaz, 2014).

In preparation for this dissertation, I piloted a single interview and reflected on the process. One takeaway gleaned from that experience was my tendency to follow up with the participant on the last concept discussed. This is known as the recency effect (Baddeley & Hitch, 1993). This posed a possible problem for my constructivist grounded theory interview techniques as it could result in missing specific conditions and what was really happening. Given my understanding and reflection on my interview tendencies, I remedied this through the implementation of follow up probes that encouraged the participants to reflect and explain the impact of certain conditions of their experience. Having implemented the pilot study prior to my research provided me with practical, first hand experience.



Given my reflection on the pilot study, I determined the following question was appropriate for the initial opening question, “Thank you for talking with me today. Can you share with me about a time when you were a finalist for the superintendency and did not get the job? How was that process for you?” This question served as the starting point for the interview. However, given the nature of the grounded theory process, additionally theoretical probes were added as the study unfurled.

### **Theoretical Questioning**

At the onset of the study, I started each interview with the aforementioned question. As the interviewing of participants continued, and due to the constant comparative process, additional and intentional questions were added to the interview process. The deeper I engaged with the data and continued to code and reflect on the language and stories shared by the participants, it was clear that common experiences were emerging. These will be described in detail in Chapter IV; however, it is important to note that theoretical questioning was required during the interviewing process. After the sixth interview, I added the following question to the interview process:

- Did you notice any physical changes or body language from the board in your second interview?

This was an intentional theoretical question that emerged from the data. Charmaz (2007) noted that a central tenant of grounded theory is the ongoing theoretical adjustments that occur during the data generation phase of the study.

### **Virtual Interview Platform and Transcription**

All interviews were held virtually via Zoom given the current global pandemic related to COVID-19 and provided three practical advantages. The first advantage was convenience. Zoom

allowed me to schedule interviews after work, and at times that were convenient for the participants. Second, Zoom enabled me to interview participants throughout the country without costly travel. The third advantage was safety for the participants, as COVID-19 continued to be a challenge throughout the country at the time of this dissertation. Not traveling or conducting in person interviews added a layer of physical distancing protection and avoided the possibility of COVID-19 transmission as a result of participation in this study.

Zoom meeting software offered a transcription service through the use of Otter AI. Otter AI can be used as an add on for simultaneous transcription. However, after multiple attempts, I ended up using a post hoc process of uploading the MP4 file from Zoom into Otter AI. Once transcribed I cleaned the transcripts myself, by reviewing the transcript while also watching the recorded interview. During the transcript cleaning process, I removed any unique identifiers, geographical locations, or any other words that might be used to identify participants. Participants were numbered in the following manner, P001, P002, and all files related to each participant were given the same nomenclature.

I also used a member checking process and sent the transcripts to participants after I cleaned them for their review and input. All transcripts were saved on my external hard drive and in file folders labeled with their participant number. Participants were given an opportunity to create their own pseudonym on their informed consent form and added to the transcript after it was cleaned.

### **Coding Data and Coding Team**

The moment data is generated sparks the constant comparative process in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I began my initial line by line coding shortly after the data was generated (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018). I was careful

to remain in a reflexive stance and to code all data in an *in vivo* manner. To organize the codes and for data analysis purposes, I used the qualitative data software Dedoose. Dedoose is an online program designed to organize qualitative research, like other programs such as Nvivo. Dedoose has strict data protection protocols and as the data are stored within the program on the cloud, the manufacturers note that all data are secured with several layers of data protection. Prior to this study, I attended a thorough Dedoose tutorial and spent many hours practicing how to use the program. As Holloway and Schwartz (2018) noted “coding is the act which links together observations and information gathered” (p. 514). It is germane to grounded theory and a central tenant of the method. Thus, as I began to conduct initial interviews and generate data, *in vivo* coding and line by line coding also began. *In vivo* coding is a method that captures the experiences of the participants in their own language (Holloway & Schwarz, 2018). A comprehensive list of the codes that emerged are located in Appendix F.

Soon after initial coding began, I engaged in the constant comparative process. During this phase, my data and coded were continually refined as concepts as various concepts emerged (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). In the grounded theory literature, the ongoing refinement and more focused coding is often referred to as axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Charmaz (2014) favored the term *focused coding*, and Corbin and Strauss (2008) utilized the term *axial coding*. For my study, I continually refined the codes as the process unfurled. As I got further along in the process, Dedoose allowed me to assign first level, or *parent level* codes, and subsequent second level or *child codes* to the data. This occurred after the first three interviews were coded and continued throughout the focused coding stage. Additionally, as I got deeper into the process, I continually returned to the previously coded data in order to refine the codes as

needed (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018). Ongoing reflexivity and constant comparative methods were employed continually through the coding process.

Central to my coding plan was the use of a coding team. I was fortunate to have access to doctoral students and alumni within the Antioch University community. I also engaged two recent graduates of our program to serve as coding partners during strategic moments in the data generation and the coding process. This coding team met four times during the coding process and worked asynchronously as well. The coding team reviewed, and line by line coded, the following transcripts: P001, P002, P003. This was intentionally determined so that we could compare codes and determine if any concepts were missed. This form of “checking” is an important factor in grounded theory and strengthens the coding process. The coding team continued to provide support and were called back together as a form of “checking” as the themes and categories began to emerge from the data.

### **Analytical Methods**

As noted above, as the data were collected through the interview process and analyzed, dimensions began to emerge. These initial categories are often influenced by the researcher’s own thinking and strongly connected to the participants’ language and experience (Charmaz, 2014). I entered this process with a clear understanding of my positionality and the influence of my personal research stance as a feminist researcher. I found the constant comparative process invigorating and dually challenging in its nature. At times during the process of dimensional analysis, the data evolved, and the various dimensions emerged, I found the need to reengage my personal reflexivity. Holloway and Schwartz (2018) recommended iterative explanatory matrices that continually emerge from the data and noted that these matrices “provide the researcher with a conceptual structure to examine the relationship among the dimensions in relation to the

context, conditions, processes, and consequences” (p. 519). As the data generation process continued, I utilized a complex process of engaging with the data within Dedoose. As the number of initial codes, and subsequent parent codes, and thematic codes became cumbersome, I found myself downloading Excel spreadsheets full of data so that I could manually examine, move, and readjust the code families while also expanding the explanatory matrix.

Given the constant comparative nature of grounded theory, the use of an explanatory matrix provides the researcher with a structure to compare data and the experiences of the participants (Kools et al., 1996). I generated 1,321 codes during the constant comparative data generation phase, and these codes were applied 2,237 times within 2,121 excerpts of data. This resulted in a behemoth of language and data to examine, reexamine, compare, connect, and finally sort into the explanatory matrix. Over the course of this dissertation, the explanatory matrix evolved and will be presented in Chapter IV.

### **Memo Writing Strategies**

Fundamental to a quality grounded theory study is the ongoing process of memoing. Birks and Mills (2015) insisted that memo writing should begin at the birth of the research question. Keeping detailed memos helps establish credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Memos also serve as justification for complex research decisions and provide the breadcrumbs that support overall research trustworthiness and serve as your “audit trail” (Birks & Mills, 2015). The use of memos also assists the researcher to refine their thinking and are a central tenant constant comparative process, which is essential in grounded theory. Memoing for me was not an easy process at first, as I like to move quickly from one activity to the next. During my pilot interview, I utilized voice memos via my iPhone. These audio clips

were then converted to text and then reviewed. For this study, I planned on utilizing the following methods:

- Voice memos immediately after interviews
- Written memos during analysis

Quickly into the process, I adjusted my original plan and stuck to writing my memos in one long, Microsoft Word document. My original voice memos were transcribed by Otter AI and added to my Microsoft Word document. Throughout the entire dissertation process, I added daily memos. I found that memoing right after an interview allowed me to review the feelings that arose during the interview as well as reminders for myself for future interviews.

At the end of this process, I have collected 65 pages of memos. These memos ranged from technical reminders, reflections of the process, wonderings about the experiences of the participants, and various recordings of thoughts to review with my methodologist or coding teams. Handwritten memos were recorded as a. Jpeg embedded within the document. Additionally, I added photographs of visual modeling, brainstorming, and other activities that supported this dissertation and the analysis of the data.

### **Technical Specifications and Data Storage**

Data collection and data storage systems are imperative when researchers gather data, and these are often steps in the research study design that may be overlooked (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). I gave careful consideration both to the sensitivity of the data, such as identifying information about participants, and the technical methods by which the data are stored. First, I utilized a back up hard drive for my computer and will keep all records for five years as suggested by J. W. Creswell & Poth (2018). This process removed any chances that the data might be damaged or lost due to computer malfunctions. I also continually backed up the data.

To assist with the organization of the data, I created a spreadsheet where I recorded the participant number, steps in the process, and other demographic data. This process was very helpful in maintaining overall project organization. These strategies were recommended by J. W. Creswell and Poth (2018) as basic data storage and organizational best practices for qualitative research.

In addition to data storage methods described above, I used the cloud based storage in the software program Dedoose, which is a cloud based program with a desktop interface that is specifically designed for qualitative data analysis. This program housed the participant transcripts and offered multiple analytical tools for data analysis. As part of the technical storage process each transcript was named in numerical order beginning with P001. This process that kept the identity of the participant anonymous and corresponded with the data spreadsheet. As noted previously, offered the participants the opportunity to choose pseudonyms for use within the transcripts and in Chapters IV and V. Each participant chose a pseudonym, and these were recorded on their demographic survey and also on the data spreadsheet. Additionally, all video and voice recordings were stored on my external hard drive with the same nomenclature. It is important to note that both Otter AI and Dedoose have strict data storage protections outlined on their websites and provide registered users with an overview of their safety protocols.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is key to ensuring beneficence and that no harm arises from the research (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have considered all aspects of this study and completed a thorough application through Antioch University's IRB. As part of that application process, I identified several ethical considerations prior to the start of the study. These included the following:

- Identifying any possible or unintentional risks to participants
- Communicating clearly with the participants of the study, including the voluntary nature of participation
- Ensuring that participants are fully informed of their rights regarding this study, including the right to withdraw at any time during the research
- Obtaining informed consent prior to any interviews
- Keeping all identifying data anonymous
- Providing participants with a link to mental health support resources
- Researcher understanding and avoidance of potentially harmful questioning
- Using pseudonyms for all participants

Due to the specific and purposeful sampling strategies utilized for this study and given the disproportionate number of women superintendents compared to men, it was imperative that I put forth extreme effort to keep the identities of the participants anonymous. I considered my own positionality and power and engaged in reflexive practices as I interacted with participants in the study. At the onset of this study, I considered the possible unintended harm to participants. The sensitive nature of job interviewing and potentially disappointing result of not obtaining the position, there was the possibility of psychological risks to the participants by proxy of discussing these events. This potential of risk was real, and, as a result, I clearly described the possibility with participants, through the informed consent process. Additionally, I provided a list of emotional support resources for participants on a web based document. Finally, as an ethical researcher, I continually reviewed standards of ethical research and reflected on my practices throughout this study.



## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness within qualitative research is akin to the term *validity* within quantitative research (Mathison, 2011). Thus far, I have described my methodology, including the various methods utilized in this grounded theory study, including my memoing process and the constant comparative actions with the data. The use of memoing is a key assurance for rigor and trustworthiness within a grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout this study, I documented my methodological decision making process. My memos also included emerging ideas, concepts and categories that arose from the data. These practices ensure that the researcher captures the full story of their research, and thus, establishes trustworthiness and rigor in their process (Birks & Mills, 2014; Charmaz, 2014).

Another assurance of trustworthiness was the engagement of a team approach to coding the data. My use of a coding team assisted in the ongoing constant comparative analysis and established consistency within the concepts and categories that emerged (Charmaz, 2014). This process ensured ongoing trustworthiness, as the data were explored dialogically amongst members of the coding team. Throughout the process, the coding team met four times and worked both synchronously and asynchronously. In addition to the coding team, the participants of the study reviewed their transcripts for accuracy of the data and meaning, as a form of member checking. Finally, I worked to consistently use grounded theory methods and employed careful methodological decision making. This ensured that aspects of the methods and approach aligned with grounded theory practices, and as such highlights the methodological congruence (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018) employed in this study.

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS**

When I embarked on this dissertation journey, I sought to better understand what happens at the micro level for women seeking the superintendency, particularly through the lens of the selection process. My initial literature review was an exploration of various sensitizing concepts related to the female leadership gap and the superintendency. In grounded theory research, the review of literature focuses on sensitizing concepts connected to the area of research (Bowen, 2006) and the literature review for this dissertation included research on the positive enabling factors for success, systematic challenges women face such as overt and benevolent sexism, and the complexity that mental models, intersectionality, and the myth of meritocracy pose for women seeking educational leadership opportunities at the highest level. From the onset, I had planned to explore the following question:

- What is the experience of women who make it to the final round of selection for school superintendent positions but do not get selected?

Over the course of several months, I had the opportunity to interview 18 women who had this experience. As a result, I wrote over 65 pages of memos, had 250 pages of transcripts, and 1,341 codes that were applied 2,000 times all of which held the rich and powerful experiences of these women.

This chapter is my opportunity to honor the experiences of the diverse group of female participants and to present the data that was generated as a result of dimensional analysis. As outlined in Chapter III, grounded theory is often enhanced by employing a dimensional analysis to the data. It was through this complex analytical process that the core and primary dimensions were elucidated. In a sequential progression within this chapter, I will describe, in depth, the explanatory matrix concept-by-concept to capture the full description of the findings. Prior to

expounding upon my dimensional analysis and the explanatory matrix, I will first highlight the demographic data of the participants.

### **Demographic Data**

Grounded theorists continue to gather data until the concepts are saturated (Charmaz, 2007). I neared saturation around the 15<sup>th</sup> participant and continued until 18 participants to ensure that saturation had been met. I also added two theoretically sensitive questions as part of the grounded theory interviewing process, which I will explain further in this chapter. As noted in Chapter III, I included a demographic survey as part of the informed consent process. I was interested in the participant's backgrounds prior to their participation in this study. To do so, I gathered specific data on the participant's age range, race, ethnicity, marital status, geographical location, number of superintendent interviews they had to date, educational levels, and their current roles. To clarify, the educational term "specialist" refers to the degree of educational specialist, which is a specific graduate level degree in education with credits levels between the masters and doctoral degree. Table 4.1 describes the demographic overview of the participants.

**Table 4.1***Participant Demographics*

	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	Marital Status	Geographical Location	Number of Sup Interviews	Level of Education	Current Role
Rosie	55–64	Multi	Married	Midwest	7	PhD	Superintendent
Susan	55–64	White	Married	Northeast	9	Specialist	Superintendent
Laura	45–54	White	Married	Southcentral	1	EdD	District Admin
Courtney	35–44	White	Married	Midwest	3	Masters	Superintendent
Glory	55–64	Latinx	Widowed	Southcentral	6	Specialist	District Admin
Makayla	45–54	White	Married	Mid-Atlantic	5	EdD	District Admin
Annie	45–54	Multi	Married	Southcentral	5	Masters	Superintendent
Diane	45–54	White	Married	Midwest	4	Specialist	Superintendent
Mary	55–64	White	Married	Midwest	2	Masters	District Admin
Alexandra	45–54	Black	Married	Midwest	3	Masters	Superintendent
Maria	45–54	White	Married	Midwest	1	EdD	District Admin
Gigi	45–54	White	Divorced	Midwest	1	Masters	Superintendent
Susanne	45–54	Multi	Married	Midwest	2	Specialist	District Admin
Carrie	45–54	White	Divorced	Northeast	9	Masters	Superintendent
Mallory	35–44	Multi	Married	Midwest	2	EdD	District Admin
Chantal	45–54	White	Married	Midwest	7	EdD	Superintendent
Moria	45–54	Latinx	Married	Southcentral	6	Specialist	Superintendent
Sunny	45–54	Black	Married	South	2	EdD	Superintendent

As Table 4.1 describes, the participants lived in a range of locations, with 10 participants residing in the midwest. Despite my efforts, I was unable to recruit participants from the far west (California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, Arizona, and Nevada), and implications of this will be elaborated upon in Chapter V. While most of the participants were married, two were divorced and one was widowed. I inquired about gender identification and sexual orientation and all participants self identified as cisgender female and as heterosexual; therefore, I did not include these as columns in Table 4.1. Ten of the participants identified as White, and eight of the participants identified as either Black, Multirace, or Latinx. Seven of the 18 participants at the time of the study were employed as district administrators, in positions

such as assistant superintendents, district directors, and chief academic officers. Eleven participants at the time of the study were employed as superintendents.

As part of the demographic survey data, I also inquired about the number of superintendent interviews the participants had participated in prior to their participation in this study. Participants who were eventually hired as superintendents averaged 5.7 superintendent interviews prior to landing the superintendency. While these data were not germane to the loci of the study, they were an interesting phenomenon from the sample. Juxtaposed, the participants who were not in the position of superintendent at the time of the study averaged 2.7 interviews. It is also interesting to note that only two participants identified having an age range of 35–44, with most of the participants falling in the 45–54 age range. Most of the women were married, two were divorced and one participant was widowed at the time of the interview. I did not collect data on parental status, however, many of the women shared that they were parents.

### **Possible Unspoken Experiences**

Prior to introducing the dimensional analysis and explanatory matrix, I will contextualize the intersectional nature of gender and racialized-gendered experiences which were germane to this study. As foregrounding for the dimensional analysis, which will be further explored in the subsequent section of this chapter, I must address concepts that arose and did not arise within the data. Grounded theorists engage with their data through the constant comparative process and as such, are continually immersed within the data. This process involves deep questioning of concepts and reorganizing the most salient of these through an emergent lens that positions the experiences of the participants within the context of the social processes. Furthermore, as Holloway and Schwartz (2018) argued that “grounded theory positions us [researchers] to explore silence as an indication of power differentials, control, and marginalization” (p. 501).

Silence in this context is the unspoken stories or unspoken experiences for women of color within this study. The gendered, and racialized-gendered, experiences became apparent and therefore, I believe that a deeper look at these spoken and unspoken concepts and experiences is warranted as precursory discourse foundational to this study.

Intersectionality looks at the intersections of race, gender, socioeconomics, and other aspects of identity as intertwined and central to the ways that people of color experience the world (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, intersectional research methods bring forth this view as pivotal within the praxis of research itself (Cho et al., 2013). At the core of this study, the research question positioned women as central to the experience of the superintendent search and selection process, and as part of this, centered the experience in a gendered space by proxy. Through the ongoing data generation process, grounded theorists are careful to remain sensitive to theoretical opportunities that arise from the data and that may guide further questioning along these veins. Over the course of several months, as I interviewed women who participated in this study, I also continually reviewed, compared, and analyzed the codes that emerged directly from the participant language. Through this analysis, it was clear that one of the most salient concepts was the gendered nature. Additionally, I questioned the role of gender multiplied by race for the women as well.

The term racialized-gendered experiences refer to the multiplicity and intersectionality of the experiences of women of color and recognizes that their experiences are inherently racialized and gendered simultaneously and not isolated from one another. This is important to highlight for the women of color who participated in this study; their experiences may have been both racialized and gendered at the same time, as one aspect of their identities cannot be parsed from the other. As noted in the demographics section, the women who participated were diverse

group, with four women who identified as multiracial, two women who identified as Black, two women who identified as Latinx, and 10 women who identified as white. Given the multiplicity of the racial and gendered experiences, as a researcher I recognized that their experiences during the superintendent search and selection process may have been both gendered and racial. One aspect of identity is not separate from the other, therefore, their experiences were likely racialized-gendered experiences. These salient concepts are elaborated upon within the dimensional analysis and explanatory matrix. Given the racialized-gendered experiences inherent within this study, there were only a few specific examples of overt racism shared by the women, which left me wondering about my role as a researcher and the possible unspoken experiences that were not shared during the interviews.

Furthermore, I recognized that there may be silenced voices within the study due to the sensitive nature of the superintendency and the low levels of diverse representation within the position. This study's purposeful sample required women to have had at least one experience of getting the "no" in the final round. Therefore, those who were still in the process of applying to the superintendency and who identified as women of color may have recognized that sharing their experiences could open vulnerability given the sensitive nature of the discussion and for potential opportunities to apply for the position in the future.

As I reflected upon the categories and dimensions, along with their subsequent properties, I pondered whether there were unspoken experiences not shared during the interview process. I am a white, lesbian, scholar practitioner who employed a grounded theory methodology to this study; thus, I brought my own self into the process. Could my identity as a white researcher have played a factor in the possible unspoken experiences of the women of color in my study, meaning that there was a hesitation for women to share such experiences with me? Furthermore,

could the sensitive nature of the superintendent search and selection process, and the possibility of identification within that search process as a participant in this study have contributed to the unspoken? In order to address this, I revisited the language of the participants who identified as women of color and rechecked the transcripts for concepts that I may have missed throughout the process.

What did not emerge as a salient dimension was explicit reference to the race within their experiences, by most of the women of color. This does not imply that race was not a factor within their experiences, but rather, that it may have been the unspoken experience for the women of color in this study. It is important to note that my coding team was diverse, with one of my coding buddies identified as a black woman and one who identified as a white woman, and their input and analysis was also part of the constant comparative process. Grounded theory requires constant comparison of the data as they emerge through the data generation process, and at times requires theoretically sensitive adjustments to the open-ended nature of grounded theory questioning. Due to this iterative process that is rooted directly in the coding and emergent categories, there was not a specific question posed on the intersectionality of the superintendent search and selection process for the women of color who participated in this study. Again, as noted by Holloway and Schwartz (2018) the use of grounded theory is methodologically aligned to the study of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

In order to ensure trustworthiness, I went back into my 65 pages of memos and into both the transcripts as well as the myriad of codes, to see if there was language that I missed. Given the intersectional nature of the racialized-gendered experiences within the superintendent search and selection process, it is important to note that there may be unspoken experiences embedded within the experiences of the women of color who participated in this study, which may not have



been brought forth during the interview process given my identity as a white female researcher or for other factors. Spoken, or unspoken, these factors and the multiplicity of gender and race that were presented in this section serve as foregrounding concepts for the dimensional analysis and the explanatory matrix presented below.

### **Dimensional Analysis and the Explanatory Matrix**

Dimensional analysis for me was like peeling an onion; it was multilayered and sometimes made me cry. As I refined the coding tree during data generation and in the constant-comparative process, several key thematic concepts emerged. In the beginning of the process, I fully embraced line by line open coding. This yielded a behemoth of codes, over 1,300 in all, which were continually reflected upon, written about in my memo log, and discussed with my dissertation committee and coding team. After much reflection, revision, and reorganization, several initial themes emerged from the data. These were then revised again and again, and the coding tree was refined repeatedly. The process was quite organic and iterative and very comprehensive. To clarify, I have italicized and bolded each component of the explanatory matrix to highlight and emphasize the terminology, and so not to lose the language within the text.

The result of analysis was the core dimension ***navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences***, and four primary dimensions ***living my core***, ***drifting from self***, ***The Big Kaboom***, and ***finding peace***. I will present these in a sequential manner, starting with the core dimension and the related properties. It is important to note that an explanatory matrix delineates the dimensions (core and primary), the context, the conditions, the process and the outcomes or consequences as a method of analyzing and organizing data (Kools et al., 1996; Melia, 2011). Dimensional analysis provides researchers with a framework for analysis and

making sense of the data, through a categorical refinement process that stems directly from the language of the participants. This dissertation focused on the micro level interactions that occurred within the superintendent search process for women seeking the superintendency; therefore, I believe that it is important to discuss the context in which the process occurred as an overall phenomenon. Given that this context was the universal setting for this study, it will live in a separate section of this chapter and will be briefly highlighted within the explanatory matrix, however, the context will not be reexplored within each dimension.

### **Context: The Superintendent Search, Interview, and Selection**

The context in which the dimensions occurred was the universal experience of the women during the superintendent search, interview, and selection process. The women described the process at the onset of most interviews, and their recollections and shared experiences were very similar. All women experienced a similar search and interview format:

- Search and application
- First round interviews
- Second round/final interviews

While the format was generally universal, each woman's recollection and description were varied and unique to their perspective. Rosie described the format of her interviews,

Um, probably the format, you know, [is] having that early introductory meeting with some board members, touring around the community piece, and the different groups at the final closed session with the board. That's pretty similar. (Rosie)

Rosie's description of the context was nearly universal for most of the participants and included a community format style of first round of interviews and a final, board focused interview.

Many participants also experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and described the use of Zoom and other adaptations such as phone interviews as part of the context.

Mallory shared her experience within the context of COVID-19:

In one of those two cases, we went through the screener, which was because of COVID-19 they were not in person. It was just on the phone, a virtual screener, and then went through the actual interview with their school board. (Mallory)

Laura also described the impact of COVID-19 on the format of the interview process:

Well, usually here in the state of [Redacted State] you know, the first round is usually just the candidate and the school board. And then like I said, the second round is kind of the breaking of the bread is what they call it, it's where you have a meal. And because of COVID-19, we didn't really have a meal, they had crackers and cheese, and just different snacks and desserts. (Laura)

While COVID-19 was a factor for some interview challenges and logistical formats, it did not appear to play a large role in the overall experience of women as they engaged in various interviews. Additionally, some women shared experiences prior to COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, I did not delineate between COVID-19 interviews as a separate context.

In addition to the similar format and shared experiences, the interview context also included opportunities for the participants to visit the communities where the school districts were located and to meet with various stakeholders. These were formal interview interactions, often set in public locations. The women seemed to enjoy these community and group interviews, which often were the first round interviews within the process. Courtney described her community interview process, “so that interview is like, an hour with a community and teacher and student group, and then another hour with the school board. That first hour with the community group really well” (Courtney).

The search application process, first round interview, and second round interviews were similar for nearly all the participants and is the context in which the phenomenon occurred.

Therefore, as part of the explanatory matrix, I will not elaborate on the context for each dimension, given that the search process format, which includes the first round and second round interviews within the superintendent search and selection format is similar across all the participants.

### **Explanatory Matrix**

Kools et al. (1996) highlighted the importance of the emerging explanatory matrix as a method to analyze grounded theory data. As I noted above, the explanatory matrix and dimensional analysis process is much like peeling an onion or unnesting a series of nesting dolls. Each layer unveils a new understanding and a deeper picture of “What is going on here?” (Schatzman, 1992). I will now present the explanatory matrix in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2***Explanatory Matrix*

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Properties</i>			
	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<i>Navigating Gendered and Racialized Gendered Experiences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boards Behaving Badly</li> <li>Gendered and Racialized Communicating</li> <li>Something Fishy Going on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disconnected behaviors from board</li> <li>Overt gendered and racialized-gendered feedback and questioning</li> <li>Rigged process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shock &amp; concern</li> <li>Paranoia sets in</li> <li>Realizing politics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questions self</li> <li>Damage to confidence</li> <li>Tokenism</li> <li>Guilt about sexism</li> </ul>
<i>Living My Core</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding Identities</li> <li>Valuing and Morals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ready to move up</li> <li>Stating core values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self awareness</li> <li>Understands values and fit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assured decision making</li> <li>Aligning values with district</li> </ul>
<i>Drifting from Self</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who do they want me to be?</li> <li>Unmooring/Who am I?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Navigating gendered feedback</li> <li>Experiencing othering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embodied experiences</li> <li>Reactive responding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiencing shame and doubt</li> <li>Negative impact on self</li> </ul>
<i>The Big Kaboom</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crisis of Confidence</li> <li>What Happened?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Navigating the “no”</li> <li>Reflecting on the experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rattles sense of self</li> <li>Experiencing trauma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wanting to quit the process</li> <li>Soul searching valley</li> </ul>
<i>Finding Peace</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coping and Reflecting</li> <li>Renegotiating and Reembarking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sitting in the aftermath</li> <li>Rejuvenating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grit and resources for reflection</li> <li>Power of spirituality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Finding Peace</li> <li>Renegotiating self</li> <li>Reembarking or pausing the process</li> </ul>

This matrix highlights the core dimension of *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences* and the primary dimensions of *living my core*, *drifting from self*, *the big kaboom*, and *finding peace*. As the nature of grounded theory research is centered on the processes and interactions within a phenomenon the explanatory matrix illustrates the emergent dimensions and is a “theory of natural analysis” (Kools et al., 1996, p. 314).

As the data were compared throughout the process, it was clear that the core dimension, *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences* captured the complexity of the various experiences of the women during their superintendent search process. This chapter is structured in a sequential manner, despite the nonlinear descriptions from the women. Their experiences were varied and complex; and as such, they found themselves in a navigational stance throughout the process. Each woman’s story was different and at the same time similar, riddled with experiences that were gendered or gendered and racial, thus racialized-gendered in nature.

### **Core Dimension: Navigating Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Experiences**

Dimensional analysis is an iterative process. As I analyzed the data, I found myself continually engaging my own reflexivity as a researcher and was careful to not impose my own beliefs and perspectives to the data. This required frequent review of the transcripts, codes, and themes that were emerging from the data. I also paid careful attention to honor the language of the participants and continually reviewed in vivo codes and reread transcripts to ensure that I was accurately capturing the meaning of the data. As noted in the previous section, the coding team and my dissertation committee were integral in this cycle as well, as they provided insights and very good questions that kept the focus on the meaning of the language and helped me from superimposing my own biases on the themes that emerged.

What was clear as the process unfurled was that the common experience of the women required them to navigate their marginalized identity experiences inherent in the superintendent search and interview process, for white women it was the gendered experience, and for women of color it was more of a racialized-gendered experiences. Thus, the core dimension is titled *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences*. I spent many hours reflecting on the data, revisiting the participants words, and analyzing what was occurring at the core of their experiences. I also grappled with the unspoken experiences and revisited the data to ensure that all concepts and categories were captured. As noted previously, the context for the experience was the superintendent search, interview, and selection process and based on their descriptions and words, the experiences therein were gendered and racial in nature.

The language of the women highlighted overt gendered and racialized-gendered experiences and comments that they encountered throughout the process. These experiences will be elaborated upon as I unpack the core dimension and conditions related to navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. As noted previously, the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences were the most salient of the dimensions that emerged from the data and given the gendered and racialized-gendered nature of the experiences, there may also have been unspoken experiences beyond the data that was analyzed. Table 4.3 organizes the core dimension *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences*.

**Table 4.3***Core Dimension: Navigating Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Experiences*

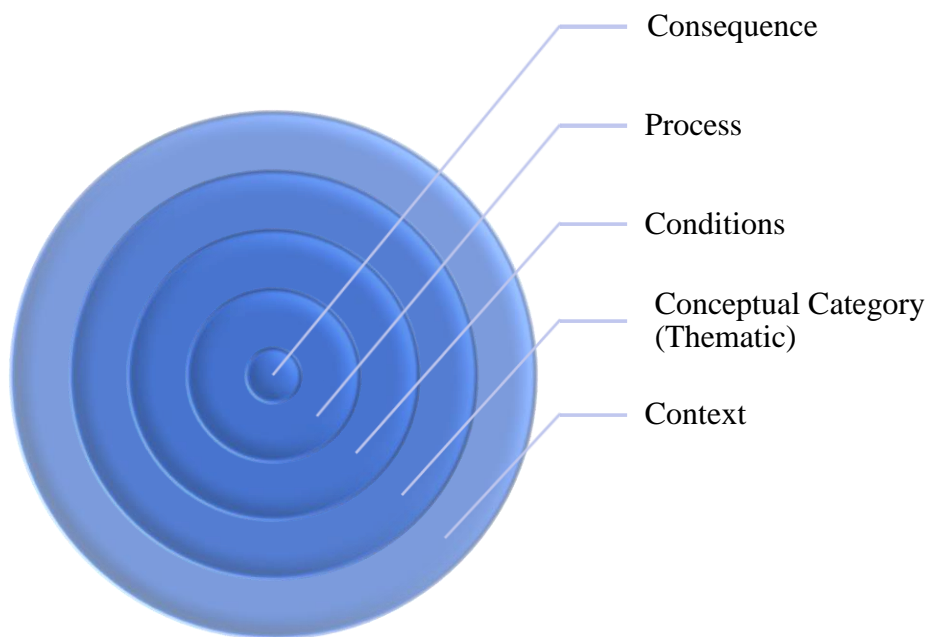
<i>Dimension</i>	<b>Properties</b>			
	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<i><b>Navigating Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Experiences</b></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boards Behaving Badly</li> <li>• Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Communicating</li> <li>• Something Fishy Going on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disconnected behaviors from board</li> <li>• Overt gendered and racialized-gendered feedback and questioning</li> <li>• Rigged process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shock &amp; concern</li> <li>• Paranoia sets in</li> <li>• Anger and pain</li> <li>• Justifying self actions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Damage to confidence</li> <li>• Tokenism</li> <li>• Feeling family holds you back</li> <li>• Navigating Politics</li> <li>• Guilt about sexism</li> </ul>



Unique to my dimensional analysis, I added an additional column to the explanatory matrix that I termed conceptual categories. Through the constant comparative process, I found several supporting concepts that did not necessarily fit within a traditional matrix, and therefore, coined these conceptual categories. These conceptual categories are a thematic expression of another layer of interactions and context, between the outer larger context of the superintendent interview process. These conceptual categories reside in a space between the outer space of context and influence the conditions, processes, and consequences. Figure 4.1 visually demonstrates the relationships between the context, conceptual category, conditions, process, and consequences.

**Figure 4.1**

*Conceptual Categories in Relation to the Explanatory Matrix*



The outer layer of Figure 4.1, the context surrounds and couches the entire experience, and the conceptual category is a thematic bucket in which the conditions, processes, and consequences

reside. For the core dimension of *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences*, the following conceptual categories emerged:

- Boards behaving badly
- Gendered and racialized-gendered communicating
- Othering/depersonalizing
- Something fishy going on

These conceptual categories frame the overall core dimension, and are supporting categories for the conditions, processes, and consequences. Each one of these conceptual categories will be further explained as foundational to the conditions, processes, and consequences. As I present the explanatory matrix, each conceptual category is the precursor space and is therefore will be explained first.

### **Conceptual Category: Boards Behaving Badly**

It was clear as the data were collected that the women had encountered bad behavior by board members, either while in the experience of the interview or afterwards. The range of bad board behaviors ranged from aggressive behaviors by board members during the interview process that was directed an interviewee to an overall lack of professionalism demonstrated by the board. This conceptual category frames the overall dynamics between board members and the women during the interview process and it sets up the conditions that influenced the experience. Glory, a Latinx women, described her experience during the interview when a board member raised her voice and became somewhat aggressive in her questioning.

One of them during the interview started attacking me. You know, kind of like, ‘So what are you gonna do? What are you gonna do if don't have air conditioning at the high school? What are you going to do?’ I’m just sitting here and somebody, one of the other board members, just told her ‘Hey calm down.’ (Glory)

This was an extreme example of the bad behaviors demonstrated by individual board members during an interview. The aggressive behaviors experienced during the interview required another board member's intervention. In addition to Glory's experience of aggressive behavior during the interview, the boards at times demonstrated other lack of professionalism.

Courtney, a white woman, recalled the lack of professionalism during her second board interview, which included phones ringing during the interview, she stated, "oh, yeah, just because like the phone is ringing. and maybe somebody came in or could have. It was a strange setup. So that made me a little uncomfortable" (Courtney).

Another example of bad board behaviors is the way that participants perceive the relationships between the board and the district search process. Carrie described the board as strange bedfellows:

It's just it's an odd little town. Everybody's in bed with everybody else because it's just so small. And you know, the board chair is married to the finance subcommittee person, and it's just a, it's all very, you know? (Carrie)

This lack of separation between the school board members and the district process added to the conceptual category and influence the conditions, process, and consequences. These are just a few examples of poor behaviors demonstrated by the school boards, as the entire process is laden with examples of bad behavior. Additionally, I intentionally described the overall conceptual category as *boards behaving badly* as these behaviors occupy a space between the core concept of *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences* and the conditions, processes, and consequences. For each conceptual category I will explain the condition, processes, and consequences related to the category and couched within the core dimension of *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences*.

***Condition: Disconnected Behaviors from Board***

A condition within the core dimension *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences*, and congruent to boards behaving badly was disconnected behaviors from the board. This condition was highlighted by many women and was a common phenomenon throughout their experiences. Disconnected behaviors from the board included times during the second interview when the board members were in the process of the interview. The overall context of the explanatory matrix was the superintendent interview process, which typically included a first round interview with the community or other stakeholders and a final interview with the board. I have labeled this condition disconnected behaviors from the board. As Diane, a white woman, described it:

I think when you when you're in an interview, you know when people are engaged and not engaged. And I don't know if it was that they had already in their heads the person they wanted. And they were kind of going through the formality of you know, these five people are being interviewed. I don't know if it was that I was the last one to go. And they were sleepy. And we're tired of this. Because there was just that super lack of engagement. (Diane)

Diane described the board's disengagement behaviors during her interview. Annie also described board dynamics during her interview and commented that she felt the behaviors of the board were not focused on human connection. For Mary, a white woman, the disconnected behaviors manifested in the experience that the board was not interested in what she had to say. This resulted in the feeling that the board was disconnected from the process and was just more perfunctory in nature. Mary described it as:

In the final round, the board did more of the just sitting back listening. Like, 'let's check the box. We're going to get this final interview done.' It was also much, much, much, much shorter, then the semifinal round. (Mary)

Disconnected behaviors from the board set the conditions for the process I called *shock and concern*. Derived from in vivo coding and directly from the data, *shock and concern* is the

process the women experienced as a result of the condition disconnected behaviors from the board. I will now expand on the process shock and concern. The outcome of shock and concern is the consequence of damage to self. Both the process and consequence, as they are dynamically paired with each other, are described together.

***Process and Consequence: Shock and Concern and Damage to Self***

The overall context of these experiences is the superintendents search and selection, including the interview and encompassing of the after interview space. Nestled within and after the experience of disconnected behaviors from the board during the interview process, ***shock and concern*** describes the process of dealing with the boards behaving badly and disconnected behaviors from the board. Up to the final interviews in the process, many of the women received indicators that they were highly favored by the boards. This resulted in the process of shock and concern as they experienced the disconnected behaviors from the board. Chantal, a white woman, described the moment after the interview, “and then it just it flipped. So, it was I wasn’t a good I wasn’t a good fit. So, I went from being the strongest to not being a good fit” (Chantal). This notion of flipped left Chantal in a state of shock and concern. Carrie, a white woman, also shared her shock and concern about the direction of the board after the interview, and expressed her frustration with the entire process, as she commented that the board had absolutely no intention of hiring her, despite the lengthy process. Annie, a woman of color, seconded the sense of shock and concern with the process, stating, “so, it just was, oh, just shocking. And it, it really felt like, I think, for the whole district really like, oh, my God, what does this mean?” (Annie).

The process labeled ***shock and concern*** was the antecedent to a consequence that I have named ***damage to self***. As the women experienced boards behaving badly, disconnected behaviors from the board, and as they went through the process of shock and concern, the result

or consequence was *damage to self*. Damage to self is a personalizing behavior that the women described as a result of disconnected behaviors from the board. Contextually, the women had experienced a first round interview which was followed by the second round interview. It was often during the second or final round interviews where they experienced disconnected behaviors which were incongruent to the experience in their first round.

Now that I have described the conditions, processes, and consequences related to the conceptual category *boards behaving badly*, I will move on to the next conceptual category, *gendered and racialized-gendered communicating*. During the constant-comparative process, I determined that a conceptual category within the core dimension was related to communication. Communication played a large role in the overall experiences described by the women, especially within the context of the superintendent search, interview, and selection process.

#### ***Conceptual Category: Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Communicating***

Another supporting conceptual category, situated within the contextual framework of the superintendent search, interview, and selection process is *gendered and racialized-gendered communicating*. While the concept of communication is also a condition within the matrix, I view this conceptual category as separate from the conditions or processes, as it frames the entire interactions within the context of the experience. This conceptual category was common within the experiences of the women. I chose to combine gendered and racialized-gendered communicating, rather than separate the experiences into two conceptual categories, as the complex communication and overt racial comments seemed to be intertwined within their experiences of the women of color. Additionally, there were two instances where white women were questioned about Black Lives Matter. Rosie, a woman of color, described racialized-gendered feedback from a board member:

I actually had someone tell me from the interview committee, that I had really good answers, but I just wasn't peppy enough. And I said, what does that mean? And they, their explanation to me was that I just, I just wasn't this, you know, happy person. (Rosie)

During her final round interview, Alexandra, a woman of color, was asked if she would only lead her district for children of color:

I think the racism piece was disrespectful. Because when you think about leadership if you think about a principal, if it's a principal of color, who would be a principal that would only lead on behalf of black kids? Right? I don't know if white leaders are questioned when they go into a big metropolitan area. Do they have the skill set to lead on behalf of all kids? I don't think that happens. So that's insulting to me and with the amount of education that I have attained and with all the positions that I've had. I have worked my butt off. I know I'm qualified. And I'm not a bragger. But for someone to question that is insulting. (Alexandra)

Sunny, a woman of color, described the benevolent responses from a board member after her final interview:

One of them, I remember them specifically, in the end, just commending me on the interview itself. Which I found kind of odd, because when you get to this point, and you're interviewing for those kinds of positions, which is the top position in a school district, you expect to have applicants who are able to interview and who have prepared for the interview. (Sunny)

These experiences also included overt gendered and racialized-gendered feedback after the interview process. Feedback was either delivered by members of the school board or by search consultants who were hired by the school board.

### ***Condition: Overt Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Feedback***

The gendered nature of the experience within the core dimension of navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences, including interactions with board members before and after the interviews and included feedback. Makayla, a white woman, solicited feedback from the head of the search committee, who made note of her family status:

Later when the chairman called back, it was actually a lady, I just said 'can you give me any pointers?' And she said to me, 'I think a lot of us were just concerned that your family would not be embedded in the community.' (Makayla)

Makayla's experience was directly related to her inclusion of her family plans when or if she landed the superintendency. Rosie received gendered feedback about her demeanor during the interview:

I actually had someone tell me from the interview committee, that I had really good answers, but I just wasn't peppy enough. And I said, what does that mean? And they, their explanation to me was that I just, I just wasn't this, you know, happy person. (Rosie)

Moria, a Latinx woman, also experienced feedback about how she presented:

I asked him how that went. And that's where that school board member was very disengaged, and he just said, 'You might be a little much [REDACTED NAME].' And I said, 'Okay?' He's like, 'Can you just tone it down a little bit?' (Moria)

The comment from the board member exemplifies the intersectional nature of the racialized-gendered experiences, for Moria, her identity as a Latinx woman being told to tone it down, is at its very core racialized-gendered in nature. Diane, a white woman, was given feedback about the way she dressed for an interview from the search consultant, stating, "the consultant said, '[Redacted First Name], do you think you could wear something different?'" (Diane).

Beyond the gendered comments about how the women presented themselves, whether it was to dress differently, tone down their presentation, or to be peppier, women also experienced racially focused feedback. After interviewing, Alexandra, a woman of color, watched the deliberations of the board members as they chose the finalist for superintendent, and noted, "A few of the board members had conversations about my ethnicity and they made sweeping statements about assumptions that I would only lead on behalf of kids of color" (Alexandra). These experiences are set within the condition of gendered and racial feedback and influenced the process *paranoia sets in* and the consequence of *tokenism*.



***Process and Consequence: Paranoia Sets in and Tokenism***

As the women experienced gendered and racialized-gendered communication and gendered and racial feedback, they moved into the space of *paranoia* and *tokenism* as a result. Makayla described beginning to feel a sense of paranoia and noted, “I did start to get a real paranoia about being a woman” (Makayla). Courtney also described feeling like tokenism was a factor in her being brought forward for the interview process, as she stated, “but I just can’t help having this lingering feeling like I was brought in, kind of trotted out to be the token candidate that made it seem like they were really open minded” (Courtney).

Mallory, a woman of color, noted in a similar vein, a feeling that women are often brought forward into the process due to their gender, and thus as token candidates without a real shot at the position:

In the bigger context of the superintendency in [Redacted State Name], I’m pretty close with some other female leaders who have also applied for superintendencies. And what we’ve all experienced and found is that we are quick to make the shortlist of interview candidates, because these consultants want to come in and show that they can find female candidates, so nobody comes back and says you’re not being gender equitable. But at the end of the day, the number of female candidates that interview and then actually get the offer is not the same. It’s like they bring us all to the top. But then when the actual job that’s offered, the majority of the time it is not us. (Mallory)

The overt gendered questioning coupled with navigating the process, was described by Susan, a white woman:

I felt like, I think I was just used here. And so that's how it felt like you were like you were used, like, they probably knew that I wasn't the right candidate for that district. Because they do that's their job is to find the right candidates. And so, my guess is my, my feeling was like, oh, I was used as a pawn or as a piece in this game. (Susan)

These feelings of *tokenism* influenced the conceptual category, *something kind of fishy*.

*Conceptual Category: Something Kind of Fishy*

Several women described the phenomenon of *something kind of fishy*. This language is a direct in vivo code from Alexandra, a woman of color, who described the moment in the search process when she realized that they had changed the format and the questions in the final round of the process:

Now, one thing that I did experience and shouldn't have, was something kind of fishy. My final interview they actually kind of delayed my interview and had me in a waiting pattern. They went and rewrote my last interview questions. So, it was just really weird. The search firm got really angry. And they're like, 'I don't know what they're doing. They keep changing things.' So, I just waited. But they changed the format of the questions for me. (Alexandra)

The school board actually changed the format of the questions and made Alexandra wait while they rewrote them. For Alexandra, a woman of color, the *something kind of fishy* experience of the board changing the interview questions highlights the racialized-gendered experiences embedded within the process. Furthermore, the sentiment that the system and interview process was rigged or not fair arose within many of the women's experiences, and is amplified for the women of color, such as noted in Alexandra's experience with the rewriting of the interview questions. Mary, a white woman, also described feeling that things were not going in her favor:

So, when I got to the final round, I will share that part of me felt and we will probably dig into this, there were indications in the final round to me that I was not going to be selected. There were signs that I was not going to be selected. And that in the semifinal round, I did not feel that. But in the final round when it got down to the board members, I started to feel some of those little indications that okay, maybe this is a courteousness, but they had already made their selection before the final announcement. (Mary)

Maria, a white woman, depicted a similar experience:

I really wondered how much of that decision was already made before the interview. How much of this was just for show to begin with? And how much it was decided before any of us even walked in the room? (Maria)

Mallory, a woman of color, noted that she had a feeling before the final round interview that the job was not going to be offered to her:

And I was like, they knew it wasn't me before I went in for that second round interview. And within an hour and a half, I had a phone call saying I didn't get the job. So again, that is my take on that. (Mallory)

These feelings described by the women, that there was something kind of fishy about the process occurred within the condition I termed *rigged process*.

### ***Condition: Rigged Process***

The condition rigged process was evident within the experiences of the women, as several noted a feeling that the board had predetermined the outcomes of the interviews, even before they made the announcement of who they were going to appoint to the position. Sunny, a woman of color, described her feeling of the process being rigged, "I know that it was kind of already a prepared situation. That decisions are sometimes already made before the process even begins" (Sunny). This led to a "doomed from the start" type of feeling for the women. Mary, a white woman, described her final round interview as being shorter than the first round, which also led to a feeling that the decision had been made long before her last interview:

It was an indication or the fact of the questions that they were asking. That was another sign for me. Okay, I think that the decision has been made, because I felt like they didn't want to hear from me at that point. They had orchestrated the interview so that it would be a much shorter experience than the semifinal round. (Mary)

Rosie, a woman of color, had experienced a feeling of unfair advantage in the interview process, where she interviewed first and the candidate with whom she was competing had the chance to view the video of her interview, including the same questions he was going to be asked, "and he had all the questions ahead of time. I felt like that was kind of an unfair advantage" (Rosie).

Susan, a white woman, summarized the rigged process through the lens of who gets a shot at the interview:

I think a lot of times, search consultants already know who they're going to hire before they even walk through the door. And so, by bringing in leveled people, it's easy to rule out a couple. Right? (Susan)

The condition of rigged process influenced the process of navigating politics and the consequence that resulted in guilt about sexism that the women encountered as they navigated the gendered experiences.

***Process and Consequence: Realizing Politics and Guilt about Sexism and Racialized Sexism***

The condition of ***rigged*** held a strong bearing on the process ***realizing politics*** which then resulted in the consequence of ***guilt about sexism***. The gendered nature of the culminating experiences each woman encountered throughout the process had an influencing factor on the feeling that the system was ***rigged***. Several women named politics as a factor in the process. Glory noted, "The fact of the matter is politics, politics happened" (Glory). Makayla, also echoed the same sentiment, "This was so much more of a show of politics" (Makayla). For Mallory, it was also a political experience and she grappled with it, noting, "I'm like, now I see how political it is" (Mallory). After she described the interview process and the final selection, Maria was asked if politics were at play with the decision of the board, and she responded, "I think so. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah" (Maria).

This process of realizing politics is a result of the condition of ***rigged process*** and is nested within the conceptual category of ***something kind of fishy***. Annie, a woman of color, equated the process to her reading of Hillary Rodham Clinton's book *What Happened*; "I think, during that time, I'm reading like, Hillary Rodham Clinton's book, 'What happened?', I couldn't get through that book. Because I was just so raw" (Annie). In addition to the description of the process feeling raw, and the realization of politics playing a role in the process, women described a feeling of guilt about sexism. It was like they experienced overt gendered questioning, felt a

sense that other things were at play within the process, and then had the experience of realizing that politics were a factor.

The outcome of this realization was that sexism was alive and well during the process and this manifested in a feeling of guilt about sexism from the women. Susan, a white woman, shared her concerns about sexism:

But I'm not really a person that says, oh, women haven't so much harder than men. I've never, I've never believed that I, although I think there is some truth to it. So, I guess maybe I do, but I'm not a person that stands on the, you know, up on the soapbox and says, oh, it's so much harder for women than it is for men. And so, but the first couple positions that I didn't get were all filled by men. (Susan)

The consequence of sexism also resulted in a disbelief that gendered experiences are alive and well within the superintendent search process. Makayla, a white woman, asserted:

I feel like I just don't want to believe that we still live in those times. But the reality is, I know that there are still racial issues, I know that there are gender issues, and I think that makes me so angry. That also don't want it to be an excuse. (Makayla)

Carrie, a white woman, expressed that this was the first time in her career that she experienced gender playing a role in her promotional aspirations, noting, "It was also the first time that I ever felt that gender was an issue. Not ever in my career" (Carrie). As Carrie described, the reality of gender and the role that it played within the superintendent search was the first time she had experienced sexism as an overt factor in promotion.

The women described various challenges and experiences that were overtly gendered in nature. These experiences ranged from school board members who behaved badly within the process, to overt comments and feedback on the women's looks and demeanors. As a result of navigating through these gendered experiences, the women had a sense of the political nature of the school boards and the search process. In turn, the myriad of gendered experiences reinforced the feeling of the women those other things were at play within the process, and this contributed

to their sense of disbelief that sexism and racialized sexism is alive and well. They wanted to believe that their merits alone were enough to get them through the process; however, they experienced the harsh reality that meritocracy is a myth. Furthermore, for the woman of color in this study, the experience was multiplied by the intersectional nature of race and gender simultaneously, thus amplifying the racialized-gendered nature of navigating these experiences.

### **Primary Dimension: Living My Core**

The explanatory matrix has the power to illuminate both the core dimension and the supporting, or primary, dimensions that contribute to and clarify the overall phenomenon explored (Kools et al., 1996). Having established the core dimension, *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences*, and the properties associated with the core dimension, I will now unpack the primary dimensions. The first primary dimension within the explanatory matrix is *living my core*. Table 4.4 highlights the primary dimension, *living my core*, which represents the true essence of the women themselves, and their strong understanding of their own identities, along with motivations for their aspirations and a keen sense of self awareness that they shared because of their experience.

**Table 4.4***Primary Dimension: Living My Core*

<i>Dimension</i>	<b>Properties</b>			
	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<i>Living My Core</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding Identities</li> <li>• Valuing and Morals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ready to move up</li> <li>• Stating core values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self awareness</li> <li>• Understanding values and fit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assured decision making</li> <li>• Aligning values with district</li> </ul>

As noted previously, I added a column within the explanatory matrix, entitled conceptual categories. For this dimension, the conceptual categories include *understanding identities*, and *valuing and morals*.

***Conceptual Category: Understanding Identities***

Embedded within the experiences that the women shared, was a strong sense of identities. I intentionally utilize the term identities, given the multilayered and intersectional spheres of identity that the women revealed. These ranged from identifying as educators, family members, community members, and leaders. The women also shared their racial identities and brought these forth at times within their experiences. However, at the center of their identities was the overwhelming belief that they were educators. Sunny commented, “As a teacher, I loved every single one of the classrooms I was in.” Annie also noted her connection to teaching coupled with the longevity with her district:

I had been in a district for 22 years. So started off as a classroom teacher there. And then I was an assistant principal, a high school principal, and then the associate deputy superintendent at that same district. And I mean, I was super invested in the district, our family, my students. (Annie)

Carrie shared her longevity with her district as it connected to her sense of being an educator and a leader:

My last year there was my 25<sup>th</sup> year at that district. I had been a biology teacher, curriculum coordinator, dean of students. I’d actually left for a year and went on to be an assistant principal at a middle school, and then they recruited me back to be dean of students, and an assistant principal and then principal of the high school and then assistant superintendent. (Carrie)

This same sense of dedication to education was shared by Laura, as she noted, “You know, this is my 26th year in education. And so, having that experience and being I mean, I’ve been in several leadership positions” (Laura). In addition to a sense of being an educator and being connected to education as a field, the women shared a sense of pride with their identity as



members of their families, either as spouses, parents, or children. As Glory described the relationship with her father, there was sense of loyalty and caregiving, as she noted, “my father was sick for a long time. I took care of my father for 12 years” (Glory). Annie also described her family and their role in her life, noting, “we have three older boys, but they’re out of the equation. So, it’s really about that little guy and my husband” (Annie).

Many of the women also discussed either an empty nest as part of their identity as parents or having adult children return to home. It was clear as the women shared stories about their families, that they truly connected their sense of family to their identities.

You know what, initially, yes, there was this. I have a, my daughter is actually in graduate school at [Redacted College Name]. And, and she’s getting her physical therapy doctorate. She’s living with us now, which is fun. (Laura)

Chantal shared about having an empty nest, “my husband, I became empty nesters. And we knew that our son was graduating, my husband works from home and also extremely supportive” (Chantal). The women also saw themselves as leaders. This sense of identity, that they had developed and became leaders, was a thread throughout their experiences. Laura summed it up, “And so again, you know, as a woman leader, as a mama, I am ready.” It was the experience level that the women shared, associated with their dedication as educators that really influenced the women to want to move up and navigate the path to the superintendency. The women often talked about feeling ready for the experience, which in turn related to the condition *ready to move up*.

### ***Condition: Ready to Move Up***

There was a strong impression that as the women embarked on the process of the superintendent interviews, they felt that they were ready to move up. This condition was

described by many of the women. Gigi articulated her drive to reach the superintendency as being ready to move up:

Well, I think that deep inside I've always believed in myself. I knew I could be a superintendent. I've always been driven by the value and the incredible importance of public education. And what it is and why it's so important. And as I was a teacher I was just like, 'oh, gosh, I could be a principal.' And that would be interesting and work with all the teachers and then as I became a principal, I realized how much I just kind of was driven to be a superintendent and how interesting it is. (Gigi)

As she shared, it was clear that she had a strong sense of being able to do the job and a sense of readiness to move up. Laura also described her readiness to move up as, "I feel like everything's really prepared me and, and I'm definitely ready, I'm ready to move into a superintendency" (Laura).

Makayla shared desire to move to the next level, and noted a level of confidence in her qualifications and skills for the position, noting, "I felt very confident in my knowledge I felt very confident in my ability to do the job" (Makayla). In addition to wanting to move up, there was a feeling that women understood their abilities and the role they played in readying them for the position. Alexandra stated, "You know, I've been a principal at all three levels, had significant amount of experience at the district level as an assistant superintendent, and a whole host of other things" (Alexandra). Within the condition of *ready to move up* is the process I termed *self awareness* and the consequence *assured decision making*. The process and condition relate closely to the condition of ready to move up and indicate the process by which the women embraced decision making as it relates to the decision to apply for the superintendency.

### ***Process and Condition: Self Awareness and Assured Decision Making***

As the women expressed their intersecting identities, as women of color, parents, spouses, educators, and leaders, they also shared a level of self awareness. This was noticeable amongst the women's understanding of their own selves, including their own personalities, likes

and dislikes, and through their experiences. Glory shared her thoughts on her integrity as central to herself:

People already know that I am straight by the book. In that sense, I am not going to compromise the integrity of the district or myself, my values, I'm not going to do that. If that ever happened, if ever you come across it, then I will probably tell you where to go or it's time for me to move on. But I will never I'll never do that. Yeah, I like to sleep at night with a clean, clear conscience and knowing that I'm doing the best job that I possibly can. (Glory)

Chantal summarized her belief system and demonstrated a strong understanding of her self awareness as a leader, when confronted with a school board that was leery of the Black Lives Matter movement and the role of the superintendent:

And, you know, I think it's important to understand there's a difference between a movement and between an organization and that people can be pro police and pro black lives. It's not an either or, and my social media was not taken down when I was interviewing, because I wanted communities to know this is this is who I am as a leader. There wasn't anything in there that I felt was political. I think it's a human, you know, humanitarian thing, issue and not a political issue. I think that's all I had said is that, you know, I think it's important that you understand, I did say this that my advocacy and I make sure that my staff, students, and families of color know that I am an ally, and then I am listening, and I am safe person. And I'm here for them. (Chantal)

The women also described a level of self awareness about how others viewed them, either as leaders or as humans. Diane shared, "I mean, I think I've always been pretty easygoing", while Glory noted, "They've always told me that I've been very levelheaded." The women were confident of their abilities to do the job of superintendent. They also highlighted a keen understanding of their selves. This confidence influenced the consequence *assured decision making*. Courtney described her assured decision making as it related to the decision to apply for the superintendency:

I knew that there had been a lot of fireworks in that district. Like, they had some pretty wild dynamics going on between the board and the superintendent at the time. And so, I thought, and they needed to do a lot of facilities work, which is one of my strengths. I thought I was going in as a strong candidate. (Courtney)

Her understanding of her abilities and confidence in the leadership skills needed for the community came through in view that she would make a great candidate for the position. Other women had similarly expressed this assured nature, as Chantal did when she described the decision to apply to a particular district:

I was really excited because it was very innovative district, and I thought that my skill set would be really great. And that it I thought that it matched my values or thought that it should have. (Chantal)

Susan tapped into her self awareness and assured decision making as she chose to apply to a district that aligned to her skills, and to her identity as a member of the community:

I think that, like my skills and background, I have a special education background to match the need here in this community. I think that I mean, my heart was here. I lived in this town for seven years, and my parents live in this town, my sister lives in my old house. And so, my heart was here. And what was interesting after this interview, I said, During the interview, I said, it's kind of like coming home, this is a place that I wanted to work. (Susan)

The women relied on their strong understanding of their identities and often expressed a level of confidence and assurance in their decisions to apply to the superintendency. Within the primary dimension *living my core*, the women also described their values and often articulated the notion of fit. This led to the conceptual category *valuing and morals*, and the condition, *stating core values*, which expanded into the process *understanding values and fit* and the consequence *aligns values to fit with district*.

### ***Conceptual Category: Valuing and Morals***

Rife within the primary dimension *living my core*, were the sentiments that the women had a strong understanding of their identities and often connected these identities with the conceptual category *valuing and morals*. At times, the women did not explicitly state valuing and morals; however, the way they explained their perspectives and experiences implied their understanding of values. Glory summed her perspective up by noting. "I'm not going to cheat,

steal or lie or put any anybody's self interest above our students" (Glory). Other women also expressed their core beliefs, like Susan, who noted "and so, I have to be true to who I am and what my core is and feel confident that this is me" (Susan). It was this understanding of their true core, their values, and morals, that affirmed the condition, *stating core values*, and the process *understanding fit*, and the consequence of *aligning values with district*. As the notion of fit arose in the dialogue with the women, it was clear that it was not just a reactionary perception of the school boards as they made their final decisions, but rather, a process by which the women articulated what they were looking for in a school district.

### ***Condition: Stating Core Values***

The condition stating core values within the conceptual category valuing and morals highlighted the true understanding of the women and their sense of self. They described being strong and capable, and ready to rise up to the challenge of the superintendency. Glory expressed her work ethic as a strength:

I work and I work until I'm done. And that means working till eight, nine o'clock at night, I am going to work till eight o'clock nine o'clock at night to get the job done and I will answer every phone call. I want to be reliable and dependable. The principals that we have they know that I am going to be answering my phone 24/7, 365 days a year. If they need something I am going to call. What I mean is that I can be depended on and so in that sense I'm not going to compromise. (Glory)

Diane also described her level of work ethic as a core value and germane to her leadership:

I'm boots on the ground. You know? I'm gonna wipe tables off. In my previous district, if someone pukes in the hallway and there's nobody else to clean it up. Okay, I will clean it up, like no big deal, right? I mean, I'm a mom of four. I can do those things. And I also think that sends a message to everybody else that this is a team, you know, that we're in this together? Nobody's better than anybody else. We're all here for the sake of these kids and for these adults. (Diane)

While the women did not explicitly list their core values, they described a level of understanding and awareness of their true selves, and what they stood for. Being dependable,

available, and connected to education was clearly a value for the women. Other women alluded to the importance of understanding fit from the perspective of an applicant and as a person with agency. There was a level of power in their assuredness and the women connected this to the notion of fit. Traditionally, fit is often used as the result of an interview process, in that those who do not get chosen, were not a “good fit” for organizations or positions based normative hegemonic stereotypes. These women had a different interpretation of fit, which was more of an opportunity to align their search process to districts they viewed were a fit for them, thus aligning to their values and morals.

***Process and Consequence: Understanding Fit and Aligning Values with District***

The primary dimension *living my core* was resolutely connected to the women’s sense of self and an understanding of their core values and identities as parents, spouses, educators, and leaders. Laura shared her notion of fit:

I see it as a district that I know that a I would be supported, that everyone on that board believes and has the same vision as I do. And we share the same values and beliefs that I know that the community, you know, having children of my own, knowing that that’s a good community that I would want to raise my child in as well. And I think the biggest piece is knowing that they would have my back, you know, that we would be a team and that we would be able to move through those things would be very difficult at times, that that we would be able to really work well together and mesh together and be able to come to consensus and work well to be able to move, continue to move the district forward. So important. (Laura)

One participant, Diane described fit as alignment between the districts and her own values; that these had to align for the sake of students to be a “good” fit. Chantal harkened her notion of fit to that of a marriage:

I think really finding the right superintendency is a lot like a marriage, and you have to have values that align with the district, the board. I was originally looking at some smaller districts, I think, because of my lack of confidence and my confidence was with smaller districts. That’s where my experience was. But, with the superintendency, I had found that some of those smaller districts, their values weren’t necessarily aligning with mine. (Chantal)

In addition to the process of understanding fit, the consequence of aligning values with district also demonstrated a level of agency for the women. They were steadfast that their core beliefs fit with the districts they applied to. Laura related the notion of fit to her alignment of values when seeking the superintendency, “but again, I’m not one to just put in for something to put in for it, I do want to make sure it's going to be a good fit for me, and then I’ll be successful in the position” (Laura).

The primary dimension, *living my core*, is essentially the women themselves: it is their core identity, their understanding of who they are, their racial identities, what they value, and how they see themselves as humans and as leaders. It is through that lens, the notion of *living my core*, that guided the women to take the leap and jump into the superintendent search process. As a result, the women articulated a deep understanding of fit from the perspective of the job seeker, rather than because of losing the position to someone else. This definition of fit was empowering to the core of who they were as leaders, and held a sense of agency and alignment, which was powerful. The women were not at the whim of the system, but rather strong agents in their journey.

### **Primary Dimension: Drifting from Self**

*Drifting from self* emerged from the ongoing experience set within the context of the superintendent search process. As described previously, the context for the dimensional analysis and explanatory matrix was the superintendent search process, which included the superintendent search, application, and first and second round interviews. For the women who eventually landed a superintendency at the time of their participation in this study, they had interviewed for the superintendency an average of 5.8 times. For those who had yet to obtain a superintendency, their experiences averaged 2.7 interviews. For all, this process was intense and as a result, the

described a phenomenon of drifting from self. Table 4.5 is the explanatory matrix for the primary dimension *drifting from self* and includes the conceptual categories *who do they want me to be?* and *unmooring/who am I?* the conditions *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered feedback* and experiencing othering, the processes *embodied experiences* and *reactive responding*, and the consequences *experiencing shame and doubt* and *negative impact on self*.



**Table 4.5***Primary Dimension: Drifting from Self*

<i>Dimension</i>	<b>Properties</b>			
	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<i>Drifting from Self</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who do they want me to be?</li> <li>• Unmooring/Who am I?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating gendered feedback</li> <li>• Experiencing othering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embodied experiences</li> <li>• Reactive responding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing shame and doubt</li> <li>• Negative impact on self</li> </ul>

As Table 4.5 describes, there were several conceptual categories and properties related to the primary dimension. Makayla summarized the conceptual category of *drifting from self*:

I know the farther I got along in the process I felt like I was getting farther away from myself. Does that make sense? Like I was wanting to do well. I felt like I wasn't being the genuine [REDACTED NAME]. I wasn't really who I really am, and that bothered me more than anything else. (Makayla)

It was as if she became aware of losing who she truly was because of the interview process and the intense gendered experiences that she navigated. Several conceptual categories became apparent in relation to the primary dimension of *drifting from self*. The first is the conceptual category *who do they want me to be?*

***Conceptual Category: Who do They Want Me to Be?***

This conceptual category encompasses the women's questioning of self as she experienced *drifting from self*, and often included concerns about how she physically presented and dressed during the interviews. At times, this conflict was internal, as the participants questioned themselves and how they dress. In other circumstances, their sense of *drifting from self* was directly related to the feedback the women received from the school board or consultants. Additionally, as the interview process moved along, the women described a sense of questioning their own outward expressions of self, which included their facial expressions and how they were perceived by the school boards. Due to the gendered and racialized-gendered feedback, they encountered along the journey, the women internalized their own worth and questioned who do they want me to be? Rosie, a Latinx woman, described her experience:

And I don't, I don't intend to come across like, I'm mad at something. But if I'm at work, I laugh all day at home, but when I'm at work, I do take a very serious tone. I think it's my facial expressions I have, when I start thinking about what my face looks like, I get very self-conscious and then the thought process goes away. I'm thinking about that. Like, I can't think about the actual question, and I don't like that. I like focusing on what I'm being asked to answer it's not a conscious thing that I don't smile a lot. (Rosie)

Rosie's recollection of concern about how she visually presented herself to the board during the interview highlights the significance of the women's experience of racialized-gendered expectations and gendered feedback. As a Latinx woman, the intersectionality embedded within her experience highlights the double whammy of race and gender, and the role that this plays as women of color interview. Other women expressed concerns over how they looked as well. Makayla, reflected on how she felt, noting, "So how can I change everything about me to look successful? To look confident? To look like I know what I'm doing? To look like I could be a superintendent?" (Makayla).

Gigi described the pressure to look the role of superintendent, and how women put more thought into the way they look than their male counterparts:

Looking around the room thinking, 'I feel pretty good.' And then you don't. I've had all of that but certainly just being out in the waiting area, and its usually males in the room. I think dress is very intimidating, you know? Men don't. (Gigi)

Gigi's description of waiting in a room for the interview and worrying about how she looked contributed the conceptual category *who do they want me to be?* Conceptually, this phenomenon was laden with self-doubt and questioning. The condition under which the women experienced the feeling *who do they want me to be* was directly connected to *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered feedback*. As a condition, *navigating gendered and racialized-gendered feedback* required the women to digest feedback related to their gender and racialized-gendered expressions, rather than their substance and their value. These experiences were both internalized questioning that arose from the external feedback and was a result of the need to navigate such feedback.

***Condition: Navigating Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Feedback***

When the women experienced gendered feedback described previously, they were faced with the reality that overt sexism was alive and well within the context of the superintendent search process. Mary, a white woman, who received a “no” after her final interview and sought out feedback from a search consultant who noted, “What he truly felt was that two things were not in my favor. Number one, that the board wasn’t ready for a female superintendent” (Mary). As the women experienced gendered and racialized-gendered feedback solely based on their outward gender expressions and identities, they found themselves navigating challenges out of their control. This feedback required the women to navigate an experience in a way that was incongruent to the success they had experienced in their careers as they had described success throughout their careers.

***Process and Consequence: Embodied Experiences and Experiencing Shame and Doubt***

The embodied experience of navigating the gendered experience often resulted in physical discomfort in situ. I describe this as in situ, as the discomfort occurred during the interview process and during the actual interview. Courtney noted that during her interview:

I am remembering there was a moment of physical discomfort. I’m trying to think what it was if I choked on some water a little bit. Or just I got really hot. I remember now we’re talking about it, that there was there was something physically going on. (Courtney)

For other women they described a post hoc experience of the process of losing the job, even when they felt they were the most qualified and had done their best in the interview. Mary described this as an out of body experience:

Also, at the board meeting where he was appointed as superintendent. I felt like there was sort of this out of body experience. Right in the middle of the board meeting, I had this moment where I felt like I was floating above and watching it and feeling like, ‘I don’t think this is really happening. Like, I think that I’m watching. This isn’t really happening, but it actually happened.’ (Mary)

The repercussion of the experience had the consequence of *experiencing shame and doubt*. It was as if the women sat within the aftermath of the loss, having physically endured the process, and had emotionally navigated the gendered feedback that they felt a sense of shame about losing. Carrie described this feeling,

Because I felt like I disappointed my team, because the principals were really upset, because their input wasn't considered. I mean, they had input, but it was, you know, it was the opposite of what they had wanted. And I felt like I disappointed them, like I hadn't done well enough and hadn't, you know, fulfilled my obligation to be chosen. (Carrie)

This was after she had applied for a position in her home district and had the full support of her team to go for the position. Other women described a feeling of doubting their abilities to do the job and was deeply personal to their sense of self. Mallory, a woman of color, described this experience:

I think just mostly questioning like, am I a good person? Do they think I'm hard to work with? Am I hard to work with? I have, you know, though, it just goes so much deeper than that one piece. (Mallory)

The experience of shame and doubt was summed up by Makayla, a white woman, when she said, "It just made me question myself as a professional" (Makayla). Alexandra, a woman of color, also shared this questioning in the aftermath of the interview process, "I was just trying to understand the decision that was made and why" (Alexandra). Ancillary to the consequence experiencing shame and doubt was the conceptual category *unmooring/who am I?* The sense of unmooring from self describes the centralized feeling that the process rattled the women's understanding of self and their identities.

### ***Conceptual Category: Unmooring/Who Am I?***

The conceptual category *unmooring/who am I?* is interconnected to the primary dimension *drifting from self*, as the women went deeper into the superintendent search process,

they described a sense of disconnecting from self and a questioning of who they were. Makayla described not being genuine or herself during the interview process, “I felt like I wasn't being the genuine [REDACTED NAME]. I wasn't really who I really am, and that bothered me more than anything else” (Makayla). While Makayla discussed not being who she was, Rosie, a woman of color, also grappled with the sense of unmooring from herself, “I don't want somebody to try to change who I am. I don't want to change who I am” (Rosie). This unmooring is bound to her identity as a woman and a woman of color and is laden with racialized-gendered undertones. Annie, a woman of color, personalized the loss of the position, and portrayed a sense of guilt with not getting the position, which in a sense was unmooring self, “so, I was like, golly, you know, something's wrong with me that that they don't like me. They don't want me to be here, you know?” (Annie).

Associated with the conceptual category of unmooring/who am I? was the condition *experiencing othering*. Experiencing othering occurred as a direct result of the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. The feedback many women received was gendered and racialized-gendered in nature, so much so that they internalized the process and had a level personalizing and internalizing the othering feedback.

***Condition: Experiencing Othering***

Gendered and racialized-gendered feedback was typically given after the interviews; however, that was not always the case for the women. Some received feedback prior to the interview process as well. One woman had her resume reviewed by a state association prior to applying to the superintendency and was told that her was too visibly feminine and that it read like she was a woman. Susanne, a white woman, shared:

They told me when they looked at the resume, they were like, I don't know how if this will work for you. That's literally like they had no qualms with the content of the resume. That just how it looked. (Susanne)

This type of gendered messaging had the effect of othering on the women. Moria, a Latinx woman, described a sense of othering in the feedback she had post final interview, when she did not get the position:

I always follow up with them. The one that I didn't get that was close to my hometown where I grew up the one that was 11 miles away. I asked him how that went. And that's where that school board member was very disengaged, and he just said, "You might be a little much." And I said, "Okay?" He's like, "if you can just tone it down a little bit." (Moria)

This comment of "tone it down" exemplifies the intersectional nature of the experiences of women of color in this study. Several women had gendered and racialized-gendered feedback about how they looked and engaged with the boards. Rosie, a woman of color, shared a memory of a previous boss, "One of my previous supervisors used to tell me, you know, you should put on a little bit of lipstick and, you know, smile some more" (Rosie). Carrie, a white woman, described her experience post interview as a vague othering experience, as she noted, "We just need someone different" (Carrie). Annie, a woman of color, described not being seen as a true person, "You want to be seen as a person. Like who you are, what you value and your core beliefs" (Annie). The gendered and racialized-gendered nature of the process at times left the women not feeling seen as their true selves. This then led to the process that I termed *reactive responding* and the consequence *negative impact on self*.

### ***Process and Consequence: Reactive Responding and Negative Impact on Self***

The primary dimension, *drifting from self*, was infused with a sense that the women understood their true natures and identities, however, the process and the challenges had a negative impact on their selves. As a result, the process *reactive responding* and the consequence

*negative impact on self*. The women unfurled a storyline that included responding in the moment of the interview, especially during moments when they felt the process was rigged or when the board members seemed disengaged or cold. This occasioned *reactive responding* during the interview, which then had a consequence of *negative impact on self*. Courtney described how she altered her engagement level with the board during her final interview:

I probably matched their level of engagement as we went on. And it was definitely a more formal environment then the community piece which makes perfect sense. When I interviewed where I am now, it was like that too. But yeah, I came in you know, kind of like, I had just come from that community. I came like that, and I think I gradually kind of closed up and got more formal and because there just wasn't any give and take, like there had been in the other interview. (Courtney)

This sentiment of *reactive responding*, when the women changed the way they interviewed, typically occurred in reaction to the behaviors of the board members during the interview. Mary, a white woman, had a similar experience as she described reactive responding:

And I'm already feeling like, they're asking me questions, but they don't really want to hear from me. I think I probably gave much shorter responses than what I would have, would have wanted to, and what I had in other interviews as well. (Mary)

Moria, a LatinX woman, described losing her train of thought in response to the board, which is also connected to the sense of unmooring from self:

It makes you lose track of where you're at. You may have a really good idea in your head, and you start down that path, and then you see them losing interest and then you kind of lose focus on where your words and where your answer is going. (Moria)

Other women described this process in other ways. Rosie noted, "I just answered the questions and was very serious about what I was trying to get across" (Rosie). Mallory also commented on how she engaged during the interview, "Something was really strange. I mean, you just go in and you just, it's really like game face" (Mallory).

The process of *reactive responding* had a direct influence on the consequence of *negative impact on self*. As the women went farther along in the interview process, and faced the



gendered and racialized-gendered feedback, disengaged behaviors from the board and grappled with their own identities, they found themselves reactive responding during the interviews. This, in turn, resulted in a *negative impact on self*.

The consequence *negative impact on self* surfaced through the women's use of language and descriptions of feelings and emotions. For Annie, she reflected, "I felt well, just humiliated" (Annie). Makayla stated, "I was very depressed" (Makayla). Laura, also echoed these sentiments, "um, like I said earlier, I mean, yeah, it was disappointing" (Laura). Chantal elaborated on the negative impact and stated, "I don't know how else to explain it other than just really deflated, defeated, disappointed" (Chantal). In addition to these descriptions the women grappled with the process. Susan reflected on the post interview timeframe, when she had felt the turmoil of the experience "like I don't think I'm what they're looking for" (Susan). This sentiment was echoed by other women as well and added to the negative impact on self. Makayla described the process as having a negative impact on how she felt, "I just thought this is not doing anything for how I feel about myself" (Makayla). These negative feelings compounded for many of the women and had a negative impact on their sense of self. This feeling came about after the women engaged in *reactive responding* to the board, as they essentially were thrown off by the disengaged or bad behaviors from the board. Additionally, for the women of color, there is a double whammy as the intersections of identity converge within the experience.

### **Primary Dimension: The Big Kaboom**

*The Big Kaboom* is a primary dimension that arose directly from Annie's son, who referred to the event of losing out on the opportunity. Annie shared, "you know, my son at the time he called it the big kaboom. You know, like, Mom, I'm sorry about your big kaboom" (Annie). This dimension is directly related to the very moment or act of not getting the position

of superintendent, despite the women's desire to ascend to the position and all the hard work they put into the process. *The Big Kaboom* represents the disappointment, the times of getting the "no" considering the hard work and dedication the women gave to the educational profession and the aftermath of the realization that their hopes and aspirations may not come to fruition.

Table 4.6 highlights the dimensions and properties associated with *The Big Kaboom*.

**Table 4.6***Primary Dimension: The Big Kaboom*

<i>Dimensions</i>	<b>Properties</b>			
	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<i>The Big Kaboom</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crisis of Confidence</li> <li>• What Happened?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating the “no”</li> <li>• Reflecting on the experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rattling sense of self</li> <li>• Experiencing trauma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanting to quit</li> <li>• Soul searching valley</li> </ul>

As Table 4.6 describes the primary dimension of *The Big Kaboom* is deeply personal and loaded with emotional turmoil and a crisis of confidence felt by the women as they processed their disappointment and felt a rattling of self. Within the primary dimension of *The Big Kaboom* is the conceptual category *crisis of confidence*.

***Conceptual Category: Crisis of Confidence***

The first conceptual category within *The Big Kaboom* is *crisis of confidence*. This category houses the condition of *navigating the “no”*, and the processes of *rattling sense of self* and the consequence of *wanting to quit the process*. Within the conceptual category *crisis of confidence*, several women described a range of feelings associated with not getting the job, after the work they put into the process and their sense of knowing that they were qualified for the position. Chantal described her experience as a wound to her ego “but I think the first thing is that the wound to the ego and the confidence” (Chantal). This was also echoed by Makayla, “It was really devastating to my confidence” (Makayla) and by Rosie “it was a little bit of a hit to the ego, and I got myself knocked down a little bit” (Rosie).

Courtney described her disappointment with the district that she applied to, and in the fact that she was well qualified for the position:

So, I yeah, I was really annoyed, especially at that district, because I felt like I my skills and who I am, even being a woman, but not being from that community, and being a community relations person, because of my background, like, they should have wanted me, like they should have on paper. I was like, the perfect candidate for them. (Courtney)

The women used terminology like “ego” and “confidence” to describe the wounding nature of the experience. These concepts were common themes that arose from the data and elucidated the difficult moment when the myth of meritocracy became a reality for the women. As described in the primary dimension *living my core*, the women had strong sense of their identities and their values. As they experienced *The Big Kaboom*, there was damage to their egos, and many

experienced a true crisis of confidence regarding their career paths. Centered in the conceptual category of crisis of confidence was the condition, *navigating the “no.”*

***Condition: Navigating the “No”***

A condition of The Big Kaboom was navigating the “no”. The “no” is essentially at the center of The Big Kaboom and represents the aftermath of the entire process of going through the superintendent search and interview and resulting in a rejection. This was a very personal moment for the women, who described it as a damaging experience. Chantal summarized the rejection:

It’s little deflating, and you know, so I guess that it took a lot to even build up to apply. Because I think with women, we tend to think we have to have the competency and all the skills and men just have the confidence and apply. Right? So, once you put yourself out there, and for me, it was several times, making it to second rounds, even final rounds. And you know, losing out to somebody with no more experience, usually a male. Yeah, so it’s a little deflating. (Chantal)

Rosie elaborated on the experience of getting multiple “no’s” during her search process:

Not I mean, you can’t, I don’t think there was any job that I applied for that I didn’t get at least to the second round. And then like I said, five that I was a finalist, so it was kind of hard to stomach because I’m on one hand thinking well, I have to have something if you know there are plenty of people who don’t even get a first interview. So, if I got at least that on every single job, then what is what is the what’s wrong? (Rosie)

Laura reiterated the same feeling as she navigated getting the “no”;

And I think that’s probably been the most frustrating thing is when you’ve had that experience, and now you’re putting in for other positions, and you’re not getting into that first step. That’s tough. (Laura)

Laura described the experience of applying and continually not getting chosen after the final round as a tough experience. This is the basic principle of navigating the “no”; as it is a devastating and heartbreaking experience, and one that most of the women had not experienced prior to seeking the superintendency. As a result of navigating the “no” the process *rattling sense*

*of self* and the consequence *wanting to quit*. The process rattling sense of self was felt deeply and emerged through emotional language shared by the women.

***Process and Consequence: Rattling Sense of Self and Wanting to Quit***

The process *rattling sense of self* surfaced through descriptions of pain and disappointment as many of the women used emotionally charged language that was imbued with words like disheartening and trauma. Carrie described it as, “I mean, what happened after was a lot more traumatizing” (Carrie). Mallory also used the term traumatized, stating, “I think I’m still traumatized after it. It was extremely stressful. And I’m sad” (Mallory). Laura described the disappointment:

But again, and that’s the thing, when you go into these, these interviews, and especially if you make it to the second round, there is a sense of disappointment, because you do spend hours upon hours preparing and digging into and putting things together and practicing possible questions. And I think even more so than I would really in any other position that I’ve been in, there’s a lot more preparation when it comes to Superintendent interviews. (Laura)

The turmoil of “the entire process” from deciding to apply, believing they had all the skills and abilities, and then experiencing the bottom dropping out. The aftermath of *navigating the “no”* often resulted in this emotional space that shook the women’s sense of self and had the consequence of *wanting to quit* the process. Makayla noted this sentiment, “That was that after that last one, I just thought I just can’t keep doing this” (Makayla). Mallory also commented, “I’m not honestly sure that I would apply again, at least not in the near future” (Mallory). For Annie, she shared that she would not apply again, “I thought I might not because I just thought I can’t, you know, I’m not equipped to do this” (Annie).

Chantal described the aftermath from *The Big Kaboom* in metaphorical way:

I mean, I think, you know, you think about I use the word deflated. Because I'm thinking about, like, you build yourself up. So, like, if you're a balloon, you fill yourself up with knowledge and confidence, and, you know, you're ready for this. And then all of a sudden, you're told you're not good enough. So, you know, that sticks, a needle in your balloon and you deflate. (Chantal)

Chantal described so eloquently the feeling of deflated sense of confidence and self, as she related the experience to deflating a balloon. However, what was most interesting about the process was the primary dimension, finding peace, which was riddled with examples of fortitude, resilience, and strength after *The Big Kaboom*.

### **Primary Dimension: Finding Peace**

The arc of the storyline resolves with the primary dimension *Finding Peace*. Despite the turmoil that was peppered along the navigational path of the women, there was a sense of peace that emerged at the end of the experience. For the women, there appeared to be a bifurcated process at the end; they either reembarked on the process and kept on applying, which for over half of the women resulted in eventually landing the position, or they found a place of solace and comfort in not keeping on with the process. The primary dimension *Finding Peace* honors the strength and grit of the women, despite the tumult they experienced as a byproduct of the superintendent search process.

Table 4.7 outlines the primary dimension *Finding Peace* and includes the conceptual categories of *coping*, *reflecting*, *renegotiating*, *reembarking* and the properties associated with each. This final dimension is one filled with strength, hope, and fortitude; all of these themes were apparent in the women's experience.

**Table 4.7***Primary Dimension: Finding Peace*

<i>Dimensions</i>	<b>Properties</b>			
	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Processes</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<i><b>Finding Peace</b></i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping and Reflecting</li> <li>• Renegotiating and Reembarking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sitting in the aftermath</li> <li>• Rejuvenating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grit and resources for reflection</li> <li>• Power of spirituality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding Peace</li> <li>• Renegotiating self</li> <li>• Reembarking or pausing the process</li> </ul>



As Table 4.7 describes, this primary dimension demonstrates the strength that the women shared because of their experience. The conceptual categories highlight a sort of cyclical experience, of *coping, reflecting, renegotiating, and reembarking*.

***Conceptual Category: Coping and Reflecting***

Throughout their experiences, the women who sought the superintendency found themselves emersed within a tumultuous process. They were often encouraged by their mentors or others to rise and apply for the position of superintendent, and they had dedicated their entire careers to education. For all intents and purposes, they were highly qualified candidates for the position, and yet each one of them experienced *The Big Kaboom*. As the women discussed the aftermath of the “no”, and how they navigated gendered and racialized-gendered situations along the way, most of the women described moments of coping with the reality. This conceptual category of coping was a nearly universal experience in some way or another for the women; they grappled with the loss of the opportunity to fulfill their leadership goals, and thus, in turn, found ways to cope with their reality. Sunny summarized the conceptual concept of coping beautifully:

And sometimes we have to look at do we have to, but you know, to protect our own selves, our own emotions, our own hearts, and feelings. We have to supplant things in our own minds to soothe what’s about to happen. And then you don’t want to put all your eggs in one basket and think, hey, I got this. So, I can’t say I ever felt that 100% I had it, but I knew I had done my best. (Sunny)

Her strength comes through as a framework to cope with **navigating the “no.”** Despite the disappointment and hurt, Sunny, a woman of color, described her ability to cope and protect her inner self, and there is some light in how she recounted the loss.

***Condition: Sitting in the Aftermath***

The primary dimension finding peace contains a cyclical storyline, one where the women cope, reflect, renegotiate, and reembark. At the essence of this dimension is strength and resilience. The women collectively experienced the painful process of getting to the final round of the interview cycle and then receiving a “no”. Along the way, they faced various blatant, sexist, gendered, and racialized-gendered challenges, making the entire journey intersectional in nature. After The Big Kaboom, the women’s experience is described with the condition sitting in the aftermath. This is the powerful moment where the reality of the gendered challenges for white women and racialized gender challenges for women of color takes hold, and they process the experience. They often sit with the pain. And nearly every participant shared how they leaned on the support of their family, mentors, and friends to process what happened. At times, the women described feeling angry and bitter, and for others, they sat in the aftermath as almost a gift of failure. In all scenarios, the women owned their experience and demonstrated fortitude and strength. Diane described the aftermath of getting the no as a time to reflect on her experience:

I think I’m willing to learn and grow. Like, there isn’t a piece of me that doesn’t think and embrace innovation and create creativeness and thinking outside the box. I am not going to be set in my ways and not do that. I think I’m kind of open to that. And I think when you’re open to being having that growth mindset, that you you’re okay with it not always happening the first time. (Diane)

Other women shared the benefits of failing and the learning opportunities that surfaced as they sat in the aftermath. Makayla described it as “like we fail so that we can grow, and we can move forward” (Makayla). Annie shared her reflection on the process as she sat in the aftermath of not getting the position.

But it really was like well, I don't know where I go from here? Like, this wasn't what I thought it this, um, squarely in middle age, you know, thought that like, this wasn't the path, but I guess it is. What am I learning from this? (Annie)

This universal experience shared by the women which is represented by the condition sitting in the aftermath often resulted in the process *grit and resources for reflection* and the consequence *finding peace*.

***Process and Consequence: Grit and Resources for Reflection and Finding Peace***

There was a calm strength and sense of wellness as the women reflected on the aftermath of the process. This is what I termed grit and resources for reflection. It was in this space that the women described the power of their family, friends, and mentors as they navigated the journey. For many, their spouses provided the resources and support they needed for sitting in the aftermath. Annie shared that her mentor, the former superintendent who wanted her to be his successor, was there for her when she received word that she did not get the job “he was like yep. Yep. For a short period of time, because he was leaving the district. Yeah. Well, yeah. He was there for me when I got the no” (Annie). For others, it was the support of their spouses who were there for them. Diane noted, “Um, my husband was a really good support” (Diane). Additionally, Laura shared, “So again, I think being a husband, he just he wants to see me where I truly want to be someday. And so very supportive. And he still is my biggest cheerleader” (Laura). Beyond the support of spouses and mentors, many of the women shared stories of their grit:

I processed it through just a lot of personal reflection and self-talk. I thought, ‘you are still a strong leader. You can still contribute within your current role. I know you’re not going to be a superintendent, I’m here anyway. And will be here into the future for a few years.’ (Mary)

This grit was also communicated in the sentiment that things happen for a reason. Several women shared this sentiment. Glory noted “look, you know, things happen for a reason. I am

okay” (Glory). Mallory stated “everything happens for a reason” (Mallory). This was also shared by Laura, who said “but again, you look back and realize, well, then maybe that just wasn’t where I needed to be” (Laura). Sunny shared her fortitude and grit as she navigated the “no”;

It's not necessarily disheartening for real, because I'm always trying to find the positive and the bright side of everything. And in the during the interview process, I prepared. I knew things from A to Z. And I gained information that I would not have known if I had not gone through that process. So, I didn't count it really as a loss, it was really it was just a game for me, across the board. The person that they chose was a principal in their school district. And it was just a reminder that sometimes even when you are the better candidate, it doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to land the position. So that was pretty much my thoughts. (Sunny)

This strength and resilience were reaffirmed by many of the women as they reflected on the process and their experiences. Many used the word peace to describe their frame of mind post experience. It was as if they connected with a sense of peace in the aftermath of the process, which in turn gave them the strength to move forward. Mallory recalled her reaction after the process:

Like I said, I closed that door for myself and I'm at peace with it. I don't seek those opportunities right now. Not even, not even thoughts of them. Yeah. There was there was a time and place, and it didn't happen and now that's okay. (Mallory)

Glory noted that despite the challenges, she felt a sense of peace, “I am at peace with whatever may come my way” (Glory). Mary described her sense of peace, “I'm very at peace with that right now. About that I will not have that role. I'm at peace with that as for me as a professional. But I still grieve the lost opportunity” (Mary). And for Sunny, she described a sense of peace and internal comfort, noting “I had total peace. Total peace in my spirit” (Sunny). The sentiment of peace with the process also came through as women described finding comfort with where they were, even that that meant they would pause the process. Makayla described it as freeing. She noted “actually, it was very freeing. It was very freeing to be able to kind of say I'm just gonna stop doing these things and feeling so bad about it” (Makayla). The freeing of the

spirit was clearly a demonstration of strength and resilience from the women, particularly after navigating the various gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. This also influenced the conceptual category *renegotiating and reembarking*.

***Conceptual Category: Renegotiating and Reembarking***

As the women described their feeling of peace with the process, they were then faced with a fork in the road; should they continue with the cycle of interviewing for the superintendency, or should they pause their process. The answer varied and for some, it was not a matter of whether they would continue, but rather, it was a moment when they renegotiated their identities. Glory shared her renegotiated outlook on the process:

I'm not gonna be disillusioned or heartbroken about it. So again, I take it to be that I will always be an educator. And these are learning experiences for me. And so that's, that's my outlook in that sense. So, like I said, I'm in a good place. (Glory)

In the end, Glory demonstrated a strong identification with being an educator despite the challenges associated with the superintendent search. There was power in her understanding of her identities, and she seemed at peace with her decisions. Glory also shared the intersectional nature of the superintendent search and selection process from the perspective of a Latinx woman as she shared the experiences with her brother:

'I probably have three strikes against me, brother. Number one, I'm a woman. Number two, I'm Hispanic. And number three, I am worked considered single.' And so, he just laughs. He says, 'that doesn't happen anymore.' I said, 'Yes. Yes, it does.' (Glory)

Glory's summary to her brother perfectly exemplified the multiplicity of gender and race.

Additionally, it highlights the intersectional nature of the experience from her perspective as a Latinx woman. Maria, a white woman, also shared how focusing on parenting rather than the grind to find a superintendency felt like she was being true to herself and her identity as a parent, noting "and I will pick my child over the job that I get any day. I have to know that it's okay

because in the end, I was able to get things done for my child” (Maria). Mary also described recommitting to her priorities as a wife and mother:

I had made the commitment to be a mom and a wife. We’re going to remain in the home and on the land that we have. And part of it was that I just started to move on. In my professional life I would sit and find joy and value to continue to do what I’m doing.  
(Mary)

For others, there was a sense that they would or did continue the path until they found the right position for them. As noted in the demographic data, 11 women who participated in the study were seated superintendents at the time of their interviews. Of the eight women who participated in the study who identified as women of color, five eventually landed the superintendency. This was despite the reality of the myth of meritocracy and the challenges associated with “fit” as white, hegemonic, and normative. The condition associated with the conceptual category *renegotiating and reembarking* was *rejuvenating*. This was the awareness that the women had regarding their power, and was closely aligned to *finding peace*, both as a consequence and as a primary dimension.

### ***Condition: Rejuvenating***

The moment the women freed themselves from the burden and stress of the superintendent search was a liberating one to say the least. As the women described their experiences and their sense of peace with the experience, they shared a sense of energy and confidence. Many of the women described the process as a learning experience, and it was this experience that helped them grow, no matter what their next path would be. That notion of growth was rejuvenating for them as women, leaders, and educators. Chantal noted the experience and what she took away from it:

I put into it and the investment that I made, but then know that there’s destined for something out there, like, I’ve got, I’ve got too much passion and love and expertise to

not apply it somewhere. And so, I think that that's the part of, you know, learn from it and, and carry on. (Chantal)

Mary also harnessed the energy post interview search, and threw this energy back into her work at the district level:

And then there are other things that really give me energy. And I needed to really begin control my work so that I can have opportunities that give me energy. Because the take energy things are always going to be there in some way, shape, or form. (Mary)

Laura found learning in the experience, despite the challenges and obstacles:

But I think through my experiences and my number of years and my knowledge and what all I've gained and learned through the opportunities I've had that that's just kind of what the way you have to look at things sometimes is, it was a great learning experience. (Laura)

This sentiment was echoed by Carrie, who shared her gratitude from the experience:

To a certain degree, as hard as it was, I was really grateful that I had been really well supported and empowered by leaders that I worked for along the way. So, it makes you kind of want to be that person for other people. But yeah, that was it. That was a bit the big learning piece. (Carrie)

The condition *rejuvenating* was palatable by the ways in which the women discussed their experiences and by the grit they showed in the aftermath of navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. The process within the condition *rejuvenating* was *power of spirituality* and the consequence was *reembarking or pausing the process*.

***Process and Consequence: Power of Spirituality and Reembarking or Pausing the Process***

Faith and spirituality were resolute in many of the women and was a source of their strength and reckoning with the superintendent search process. As the women faced various gendered and racialized-gendered challenges, and as they sat in the aftermath of the experience, they shared their connection to spirituality. Glory, a Latinx woman, recalled the space where she was in after having applied to multiple positions, getting to the final round of interviews, and then getting the "no":

I always say, 'God has a plan.' And I believe that. I do believe that I have a lot of faith. I think that's another one of my ways. I have very religious values. I do have a lot of faith. And I just put it in God's hands. And if it's meant to be, and I think it is, it's gonna come my way. And maybe if God doesn't want it to happen? And that's okay, too. I am at peace with whatever may come my way. (Glory)

Many other women shared a similar viewpoint. Sunny, a woman of color, discussed her faith as a believer:

And then the second piece of that as a believer, as a Christian, then I always do things through that lens, and believe that it just wasn't my time, and it wasn't my place. It's not necessarily disheartening for real, because I'm always trying to find the positive and the bright side of everything. (Sunny)

Chantal, a white woman, also shared her spirituality and how it contributed to her sense of peace:

The reassurance that it just wasn't, it wasn't the right place that the right place will come around. I'm a spiritual person. I truly believe divine intervention was in play. Because if I had gotten any of those jobs I wouldn't have applied for here. (Chantal)

Laura, a white woman, described her faith in God and the bigger picture, "I always look at things as experiences and opportunities. And so, if God doesn't want me there, then he's not gonna put me there" (Laura). This faith gave Laura a sense of opportunity and higher purpose. For

Makayla, a white woman, there was a sense of relief and interconnectedness with spirituality, as she reflected on the process:

Now I've kind of just decided this is just the way it is. And it's probably because I'm a Christian. I have to say, I feel like it's kind of just a God thing, like, you know, I'm here, it's done, I probably won't interview again, it takes such a toll to go through that whole emotional process of going and then getting rejected. And I just, I think it was just too much after a year of doing that over and over and over again. (Makayla)

As the women reflected and shared the power of their faith, they also shared a sense of peace with the overall process. In the end, some women chose to continue the path of seeking the superintendency and others chose to not continue. Either way, the sentiments shared by the women exuded a feeling of power and agency: the choice truly was theirs to make, and there was



strength in their decisions. Susan, a white woman, equated the experience to putting eggs in a basket:

It's not just you, right? And so, you know, you have all your eggs in that basket, they're collecting eggs to put it in the basket. And so, it's, it's just a different perspective. And so, understanding that you know, coming to accept that is important. (Susan)

Mary, a white woman, noted that she had been encouraged to apply to other positions after interviewing for superintendent in her home district, but she felt at peace shutting that door for now, "There were some phone calls that I received to encourage me to apply in other positions. However, really, what I discovered was, it was going to be here, or it was going to be nowhere" (Mary). Finally, Annie, a woman of color, reflected on *The Big Kaboom* and the aftermath, and sought out advice from other female superintendents:

Because I hadn't done that to some female superintendents, like, can you please, like, have coffee with me and help coach me up? And what have you learned in your pathway that you'd be willing to share? And so many of them had stories that were similar, or, you know, they weren't going to have the opportunity where they were. And so, then I started feel like, okay, well, I'm just this is normal. They all had a big kaboom. Everybody's had a big kaboom, get over it. You're not special. (Annie)

The women all experienced *The Big Kaboom*, and yet, despite the turmoil and emotional duress, they also shared their strength, and their ability to find peace after the disappointment. There was a rejuvenation of their identities and a sense of agency in what was to come for them, no matter which path they journeyed down next. Furthermore, as the women of color embarked on their next steps, it is important to note that their journeys present even tougher challenges associated with racialized-gendered stereotypes they may encounter along the way.

### **Dimensional Analysis Summary**

At the onset of this research, I sought to elucidate what happens at the micro level for women who seek the superintendency. In the end, I had the honor to hold space for these women, and to share their stories. Through my constant comparative process, and an in depth

dimensional analysis, five dimensions emerged from the data. The core dimension, *navigating gendered experiences for white women, and racialized-gendered experience for women of color*, highlighted the inherently gendered and racial experiences that the women encountered on their journey. The primary dimensions, *living my core*, *drifting from self*, *The Big Kaboom*, and *finding peace* illustrate the power and agency of the women themselves, notwithstanding the challenges they faced. Despite their disorienting dilemma, *The Big Kaboom*, the women bounced back and demonstrated a strong sense of their identities, while also enacting agency and assured decision making despite the amplified challenges for women of color as they experience the multiplicity of gender and race simultaneously. The women who shared their stories also shared their pain, their disappointment, and their strength. This dimensional analysis influences the final model that will be unveiled in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The female leadership gap in the school superintendency continues to be a vexing problem within the nation's public school systems. At the onset of this study, I sought to better understand this gap from a micro level view and within a larger, problematized standpoint. It is a fact that women are grossly underrepresented within the highest position of our school systems, despite the reality that it is just the inverse when it comes to who is teaching children in the schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020a; Tienken, 2021). For women of color the numbers are exponentially smaller within the position (Grogan & Miles Nash, 2021). Since the inception of this dissertation, new data has emerged that focuses on the widening gap for female superintendents, which is timely and appropriate to bring forth in this chapter. An independent, women run think tank published new data on the number of women who have resigned from the superintendency since the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020 and the results are not promising (ILO Group, 2022). What they found was that a large number of women superintendents resigned from the role during the pandemic, and unfortunately, 36% of them were replaced by men. Table 5.1 highlights the data from the ILO Group's latest report.

**Table 5.1**

*Resignations of Superintendents during the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020–2022*

	% Of Resignations	% Replaced by Men
Nation's Largest 500 School Districts Total Resignations	37% (186 Superintendents Resigned)	70% (108 Superintendents were male)
Nation's Largest 500 School Districts Women Resignations	33% (51 women superintendents Resigned)	76% (39 of these positions were replaced by men)

From: ILO Group. (2022). *Data shows potentially historic turnover among superintendents since March 2020 and dramatic gender gap.*

Table 5.1 shows the dismal fact that women were disproportionately affected by the great resignation of the pandemic. One limitation of this research was the lack of the ILO Group to

include race as a factor within their dataset, thus, there is no breakdown of the data by race. The great resignation (Cook, 2021) is the phenomenon that swept the United States in the summer of 2021 and was a result of multiple factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For females in the superintendency, the outlook of the position is not good. Within the nation's largest school districts, women made up a small portion of the overall leadership, and unfortunately, they were not replaced by other women candidates upon their resignations, thus widening female leadership gap.

When I started this dissertation the outlook and proportionality of women in the superintendency was not stellar. Women lagged behind their male counterparts in a disproportionate rate of nearly 3:1. Unfortunately, the state of the superintendency as it relates to the female leadership gap is fragile. Through this study, I sought to better understand the experience of women from the micro level within the superintendent search and selection process, and asked the question:

- What is the experience of women who make it to the final round of the superintendent search process and do not get the position?

After interviewing 18 women and engaging within the nearly 300 pages of transcripts, over 1,300 codes that were applied 2,000 times, I have found a rich tapestry of data that was ripe with deep concepts related to the experiences of women who made it to the final round and were ultimately not chosen for the position. This data unearthed a complex story that included the following five dimensions:

- Navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences
- Living my core
- Drifting from self

- The Big Kaboom
- Finding peace

As Chapter IV highlighted, these dimensions and their associated properties represent the core experience of the women who participated in this study and illustrates the strength and power of women. Grounded theorists often use visual modeling to represent their theoretical models and propositions (Charmaz, 2007). I will now weave together the story of strength and resilience of the white women and women of color who experienced the tumultuous highs and lows of the job search process for the superintendency, along with gendered and racialized-gendered experiences situated within the superintendent search and selection process.

### **Composite Narrative**

A composite narrative is often used to describe the experiences and findings from qualitative interview research (Willis, 2019). In this vein, I have compiled a dual story based on the experiences of the women who sought the superintendency and did not get the offer despite making it to the final round of the search process. I will tell the story through the lens of two women, one woman of color and one white. I choose to do so for two reasons; one to shed light on the gendered and racialized-gendered nature of the experiences of all the women in this study, and two, to elucidate the bifurcated process that emerged from the data. For this purpose, I will use the names Woman A and Woman B, as to not assume the power of naming women, and to avoid any confusion with the pseudonyms that the women participants chose for this study. Willis (2019) suggested that methodological decision making for the use of composite narratives must be clear from the onset of their use, therefore, each composite narrative is a compilation of the experiences shared during the interviews.

*Composite Narrative for Woman A*

Woman A identifies as a white female, who is married with two children. She is a seasoned educational leader with nearly 20 years of experience, including EdD in educational leadership, and has served as an elementary principal, district curriculum coordinator, and most recently as the assistant superintendent for educational programs for a medium sized school district in the midwest. Woman A feels confident with her decision making process to apply for the superintendency, as she feels prepared and ready for the position. Woman A's family supports her and encourages this pivotal next step in her career. Her mentor, a former superintendent with years of experience, encourages her to apply. As part of the process, she does "her homework" to research and prepare for the interviews. She feels prepared and confident and has a good understanding of the needs of the districts from the hours of research she has conducted online.

Woman A applies a total of five times to superintendent openings in various districts surrounding a specified area in her state, and every time she gets a "no" after making it to the final round of the selection process. Woman A is prepared for the interviews. She studied the district's data, researched their strategic plan, and knows the emerging trends within the district based on various data sources. Upon interviewing, Woman A feels ready; her experience and understanding has prepared her for the position, and she is assured in her understanding of herself and identities as a leader, a mother, and a lifelong educator.

The emotional costs of the ongoing interviews and multiple "no's" takes a toll on Woman A. She finds herself reckoning with the process and what it is doing to her sense of self. The further into the interview process, Woman A receives layers of gendered feedback. She is told by both the school board and their search consultants that she was too assertive during the

interviews. After an interview, Woman A was asked by a search consultant, “Could you tone it down a bit?” When she requested clarification on what that meant, the consultant said, “You know, be a little less like yourself.” Woman A also receives nonverbal feedback during the interviews, with experiences such as the board members not giving eye contact and seeming disengaged during the interview process. The compilation of the nonverbal feedback coupled with the direct comments on how she interviews takes a toll on Woman A.

The further she got in the interview process, the less like herself she became. Woman A starts questioning herself; who she is on the inside, how she presents on the outside, and if she has what it takes to be a superintendent. She asks herself these questions;

- Do I look like a superintendent?
- What am I doing wrong?
- Do other women feel this way?

This sense of doubt permeates Woman A’s experience, and a sort of rattling feeling arises which manifests in her outward interview behaviors. She finds herself giving shorter, more curt answers to the board during the interviews and often she “puts on her game face” to get through the experience. The superintendent interviews become less of an opportunity to present her authentic self and more of a tumultuous process filled with gendered landmines and difficult experiences.

As Woman A goes deeper into the process of the superintendent search and selection, and as she experiences the multiple “no’s”, there is an almost out of body experience that arises. This process pushes her farther from her core identities and self; and this experience was not yielding the results she believed it would. After five distinct experiences of getting the “no”, Woman A questions whether the experience was worth the pain and disappointment associated with the

process. Despite Woman A's ongoing disappointment and emotional turmoil, she regains a strong sense of self. She reflects on her identities, as a mother, a leader, and a public educator, and is grateful for the role of her mentor, and the influence of her friends and family. Woman A reconnects to her sense of spirituality and seeks the support of her church. Given the various challenges that the interview and selection process present, Woman A also feel a sense of resilience and peace. In the end, Woman A, on her own accord, and with a renewed feeling of purpose, decides to halt her superintendent search process. She is at peace with returning to her position as an assistant superintendent. Returning to her position is not an act of giving up for Woman A. Rather, it is an empowering moment that is supported by her network, her peers, and her family. As Woman A reembarks on her work as an assistant superintendent, she is at peace with her decision.

### ***Composite Narrative for Woman B***

Woman B identifies as a woman of color and lives in the mortheast. She has over 15 years' experience in public education and holds a PhD in educational leadership. She has worked for two districts, one as a teacher, assistant principal, and director of instruction, and most recently she has served as deputy superintendent for a mid-sized district. Woman B is married with three children and has a large social circle and professional network. Woman B decides to apply for the superintendency, after being recruited by a consulting firm associated with her state superintendent association. Her husband and mentor encourage her to apply for the position and are her biggest supporters. After deciding to apply for superintendent positions, Woman B makes it to the final round for a medium-sized school district not far from her home.

During the interview process, Woman B's experiences overt racial questioning and comments delivered directly from the school board members. These include comments about her



abilities to manage the position, and her perceived level of commitment to the district. One school board member asks her if she is prepared to lead on behalf of all students, not just students of color. After the interview, Woman B encounters gendered and racial comments from the search consultants as well. When she inquired about why she did not get the position, the search consultant said, “While you are very competent and an excellent candidate, they were worried you might not be the best fit for the community.” Despite receiving this feedback, Woman B continues to apply to the superintendency and finds herself wondering, “Do white women get subjected to these types of questions and comments?”

The overt racialized-gendered nature of the superintendent search and selection process is amplified for Woman B as she continues through the process. Woman B finds herself navigating various obstacles during the process. In one instance the school board reworked the methods and criteria for selection. After she earned a spot in the final round for one school district, she learns that board members re-ranked the final two candidates for the position, thus, moving Woman B from the top spot and replacing her with a white male candidate. Reflecting on this experience with her mentor, she also recalls that the other candidate did not have a terminal degree, nor did he have the level of experience that she brought to the table. Yet, despite this, the board members reworked the criteria and gave the position to the white male candidate. This experience was illustrative of the intersectional nature of the superintendent search and selection process for women of color, as gender and race are amplified during the experience.

Woman B continues to find herself in similar situations, including an experience when the board rewrote the questions prior to her final interview. Woman B knew the board rewrote the questions specific to her experiences, as she was asked to wait for the interview to begin while the board did so. The board also targeted questions about Black Lives Matter and critical

race theory directly to Woman B; she was not sure if the same questions were asked of the other candidates. Overall, the entire process was rampant with examples of overt racialized-gendered focused questions and procedures. These experiences left Woman B questioning the validity and fairness of the process.

Despite these challenges and examples of overt racialized-gendered experiences, Woman B presses on with the process, driven by her strong sense of her ethics and purpose. Woman B believes in public education and believes public education needs her at the helm. Woman B has a strong sense of identity as a woman of color and is determined to achieve the position of superintendent because she knows she is difference maker for students, regardless of their race. “I am an educator and I believe in the institution of public education. Our students deserve the best, and I can lead a district to provide the best to them,” she said to her mentor during the process.

Woman B eventually lands the superintendency with the support of her family, spouse, and former boss who was also her mentor. It is her connections to her support network that keep her going, despite the racialized-gendered experiences she navigates along the way. It is also her sense of strength as a woman of color and conviction that she can and should lead a public school district that guides her as she continues with the process. Despite the layers of racialized-gendered comments, feedback, and overall experiences, Woman B remains confident that she has what it takes to be a superintendent. Woman B finds herself at peace with the entire process; even though she encountered unfair and rigged hiring practices and received overt racialized-gendered feedback and comments along the way. Woman B has a strong sense of identity, as a woman of color, as an educational leader, mother, and spouse with a conviction and

strength, and parlayed these to the superintendency, despite the difficult, and at times perceived rigged, process.

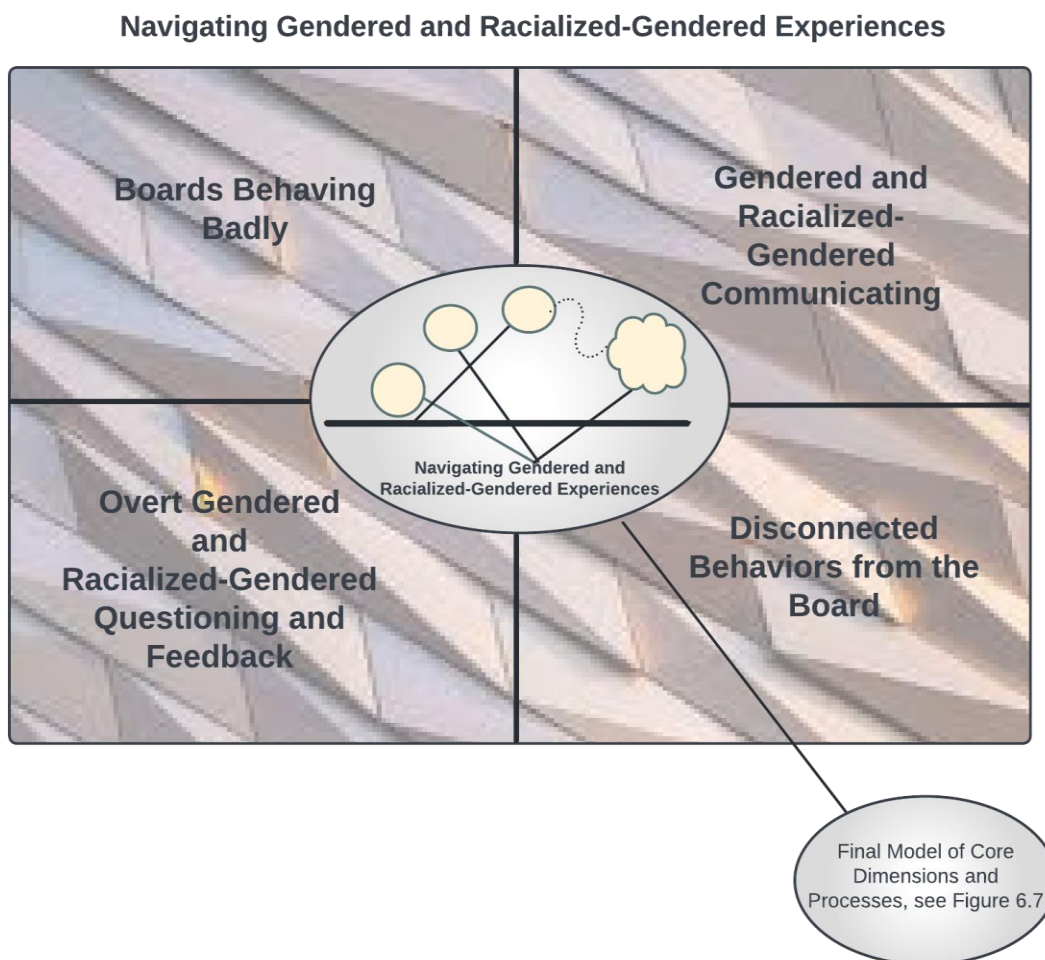
Together, these two narratives, from Woman A and Woman B, which are a composite of the total experiences shared in this study, weave a story of strength and resilience, despite overt racialized-gendered experiences and at times possible rigged processes. These composite narratives illustrate the power and agency of the women in this study; they faced difficult and inappropriate circumstances and navigated overt gendered and racialized-gendered experiences, and still were at peace with their decisions in the end. Each option, either landing the position or choosing to stop interviewing, are powerful actions. In either scenario, the women have agency and decision making. It is their choice to keep going and it is their choice to stop. I will now describe the theoretical model for this study.

### **Theoretical Model**

Navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences was central to the storyline, as the women's experiences were complex, difficult, and often sonorous with emotional landmines. However, despite these emotionally fueled and at times horrific experiences, the women demonstrated agency, tenacity, and resilience. For the women of color who participated, the multiplicity of the challenges was profound. The strength of the women was replete within the data and is a core construct of this study. The women's navigational challenges were tough and painful, yet did not stop their progress, nor did these experiences crack the women's sense of identities. In fact, I believe these experiences strengthened their resilience, propelled their agency, and guided the women to find peace.

The theoretical model depicts the multilayered experiences of the women, as they navigated the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences and signifies the core strength of the

women. Given the many facets of the experiences, I choose to represent the theoretical model in stages. The first figure, Figure 5.1, shows the various challenges the women faced on their journey; and are the universal representation of the gendered and racial experiences that are at the core of superintendent search process, and essentially also at the core of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991). The complexity of the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences was not static: they were multi layered and jagged. Unlike an explorer who embarks on a journey with a compass and a map, the women who seek the superintendency do not have such tools at their disposal; for them, navigation means much more. The women found themselves navigating hills and valleys, with sharp edges and serious consequences. Figure 5.1 demonstrates the textured landscape that situates and permeates the superintendent search, interview, and selection process that the women experienced.

**Figure 5.1***Navigating Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Experiences*

As Figure 5.1 depicts, the complexity of the women's experiences was multilayered and rough, which is represented by the sharp, jagged texture within the oval. The bad behaviors demonstrated by the school boards, including the gendered and racialized-gendered feedback is appalling to those who did not witness this firsthand. I chose to reuse the powerfully stated quote from Rosie, a Latinx woman, who summed up the intersectionality of this dimension in her

comments she shared with her brother, after continually facing the challenges of the superintendent search process:

I probably have three strikes against me, brother. Number one, I'm a woman. Number two, I'm Hispanic. And number three, I am widowed and considered single. And so, he just laughs. He says, "that doesn't happen anymore." I said, "Yes. Yes, it does." (Rosie)

The intersectional nature of the experiences was described by the women of color as they navigated various challenges associated with the superintendent interview process. As foregrounded within Chapter IV, there was also the possibility of unspoken experiences that were not articulated during this study. For many of the women, the interviews they shared with me had occurred in the relatively near past, including as recently as 2020 and 2021. That recency of the experience highlights the audacity of the experience; that in 2021 women would be subjected to such overt examples of gendered and racialized-gendered biases and behaviors. However, this is also a horrible fact that is felt within the lived experiences of women and women of color and elucidates the importance of sharing these experiences within research.

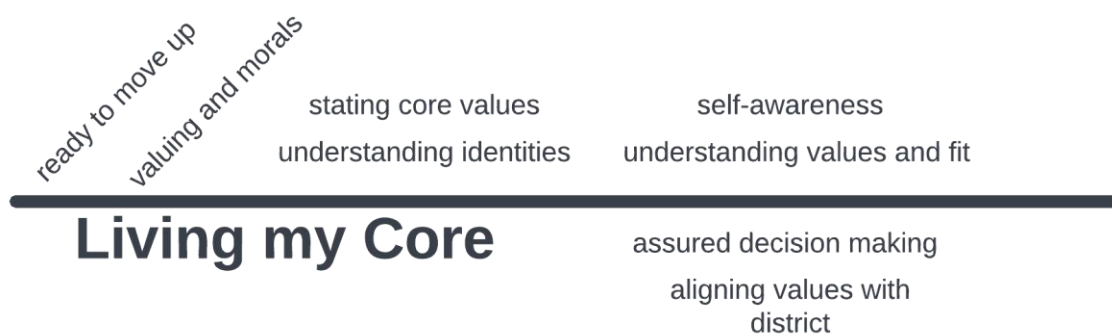
As the women experienced these behaviors and navigated the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences, they described an extremely strong sense of self. This sense of self is represented by the dimension, *living my core*. What makes this so remarkable is the sense of confidence and experience that exuded from each participant, including a sense of knowing their identities as women of color, white women, mothers, and educational leaders. By the time the women felt ready to apply to the superintendency, they had a very well developed set of identities, including social identities such as gender, race, workplace, and familial identities. They were remarkably strong women who described their values, ethics, and morals with ease. These values often guided their journey and played an integral part in their decision-making

process; from which districts to apply for and where they wanted to be in the next step of their careers.

Figure 5.2 depicts the centralized sense of their selves, *living my core*, and is the sinew that holds the women steady despite the unmooring nature of the experience. It is also the foundation of their experience. Depicted as a grounding horizontal line, the essence of centralized self, of *living my core*, is truly representative of the women themselves. It is constant throughout the storyline, even when the women experienced *drifting from self*. Horizontally presented, *living my core* is depicted as undergirding the entire experience.

**Figure 5.2**

*Living My Core*



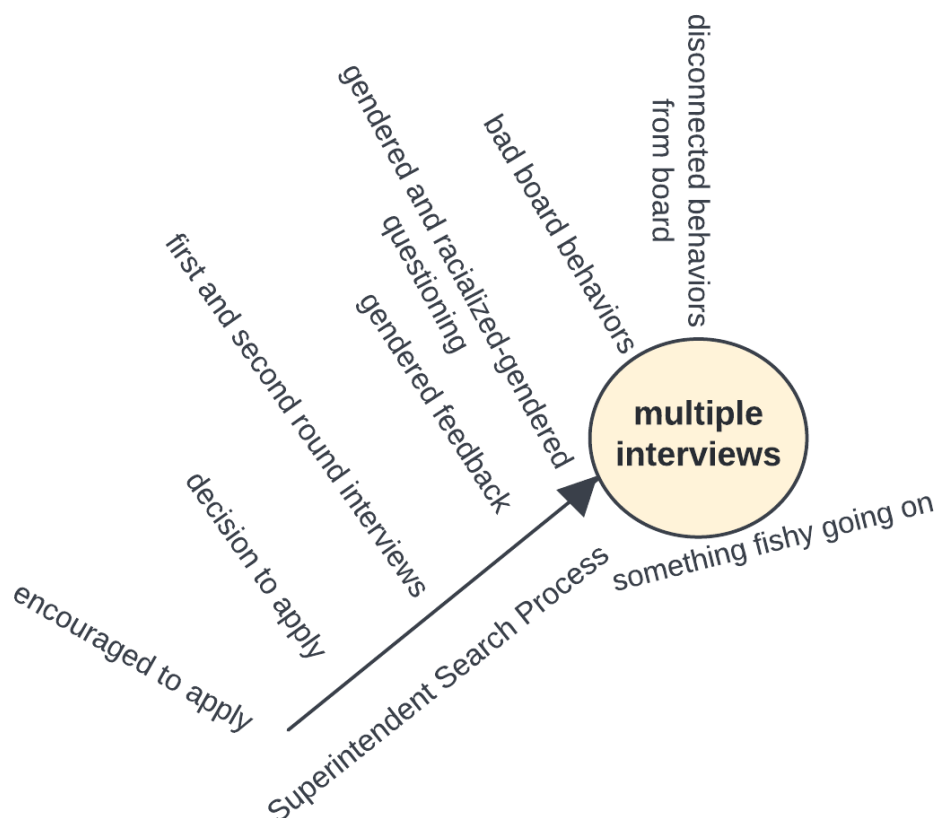
*Living my core* depicts the strength of the women, and their deep understanding of their identities. It is their core that propels them to apply with the encouragement of mentors, family, and friends. It is also the catalyst. As the women embark on the superintendent search process, they are propelled from *living my core*. The women's understanding of their values and identities is a central theme throughout the process, despite the craggy and rough nature of the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences.

Figure 5.3 represents the superintendent search, interview, and selection process. This was the universally similar process of deciding to apply for the position, a decision that was often supported by the women's networks of mentors, family, and friends. It is also unique to each woman and influenced by their experiences throughout their careers, especially for the women of color within this study, who most likely experienced higher levels of gatekeeping throughout their journey. This image also highlights the multiplicity of the experience, with multiple interviews within a single superintendent search and multiple interviews across many districts. Furthermore, the women often engaged in multiple interviews over a course of many years as they sought the superintendency. Within this figure resides the often bad behaviors of the board including the disconnected behaviors that typically surfaced during the second round or final interviews, overlaid upon the craggy surface that is navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. Figure 5.3 sparks from the dimension of *living my core* and is superimposed over and through the omnipotent gendered and racialized-gendered experiences.



**Figure 5.3**

*Superintendent Search, Interview, and Selection Process*

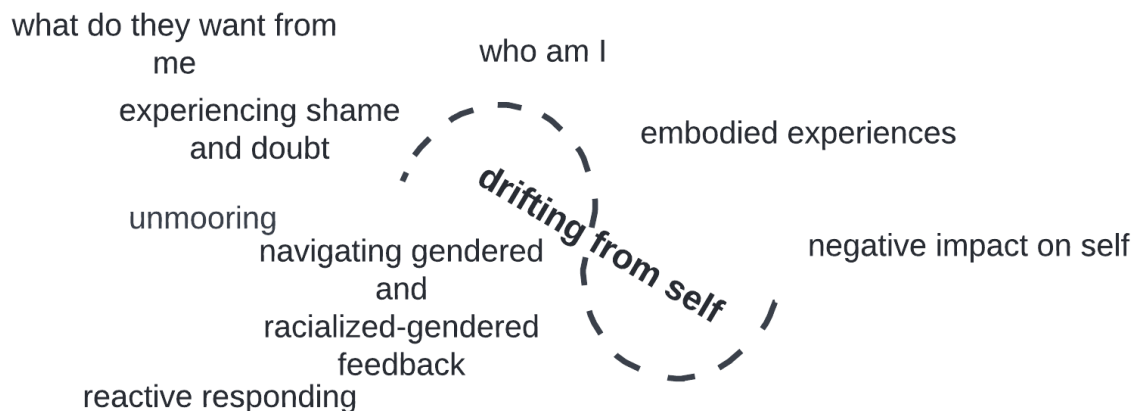


As the process continues, the women found themselves entrenched in the sometimes painful experience of ongoing gendered and racial experiences. These experiences compound as the women described the sense of *drifting from self*. This drifting occurred through continuing interactions and external feedback that focused on their external presentation such as how they looked and dressed and whether they were peppy or smiling. For some, they were told to tone it down in the interviews, and for those women of color who received this feedback the experiences were multiplied by gender and race. These experiences compounded throughout the interview process and are represented as the dimension of *drifting from self*. This drifting

experience included the women internally questioning of their sense of worth and at times manifested in their second guessing the entire process. Figure 5.4 depicts this drifting.

**Figure 5.4**

*Drifting from Self*



As the women expressed their feelings of shame and doubt, which was amplified for the women of color, who experience the multiplicity of gender and race simultaneously, the women also described behaviors that I termed reactive responding. These were a direct result of the disconnected behaviors from the board that occurred in situ. Essentially, as the women embarked on the final round of interviews, they felt confident in their abilities and in their preparedness. They had been encouraged to keep going with the process, often at the behest of the board or their consultants. They also had the support of their mentors and spouses during this time. However, as they navigated the process, and as they received disconnected body language and behaviors from the board during the actual interview, they found themselves in a reactive responding stance. This stance resulted in responses that were less aligned to the women's authentic selves and may have contributed to *The Big Kaboom*.

Annie's son described the moment when the women get the "no" as **The Big Kaboom**. This is the moment when the women faced an experience similar to what is known as a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow described the concept of the disorienting dilemma as an experience outside of one's control that offers a transformational learning experience. *The Big Kaboom* such an experience was for many of the women. *The Big Kaboom* was universal for the participants in this study. The women all had their own version of *The Big Kaboom*; for some it arose after interactions with the school board and at other times after feedback from the search consultants. For Alexandra, her *Big Kaboom* was live streamed on television. Regardless of the way *The Big Kaboom* was felt, all of the women had this experience and for the women of color, *The Big Kaboom* further exemplified the sometimes rigged nature of the superintendent search and selection process.

*The Big Kaboom* symbolizes several experiences. It is the moment when, despite their hard work, their educational attainment, their loyalty to the field of education, their experience, and despite being groomed for the position, either from the school boards themselves, or from mentors within the field, that the women realize that these factors do not always equate to landing the position. *The Big Kaboom* also confirms the myth of meritocracy. The myth of meritocracy is the notion that systemic and structural factors influence opportunity favoring normative groups, and marginalized people do not always receive equal opportunities despite hard work and being equally qualified (Acker, 1990; Castilla, 2008; Littler, 2018). The myth of meritocracy was a sensitizing concept reviewed for this study, and at the moment when the women encounter *The Big Kaboom*, they are dually experiencing both the disappointment of not getting the job and the reality that meritocracy is a myth. Hard work does not always equate to greater opportunities and that there are structural impediments at play within the superintendent

search and selection process. Additionally, it is possible that for the women of color in this study, that they faced exponentially augmented realities of the myth of meritocracy as they may have been caught in the crosshairs of gender and race simultaneously. As the women experienced *The Big Kaboom*, they faced a crisis of confidence and as Annie described The Big Kaboom, “It was a real, soul-searching valley kind of time.” Figure 5.5 depicts *The Big Kaboom*.

**Figure 5.5**

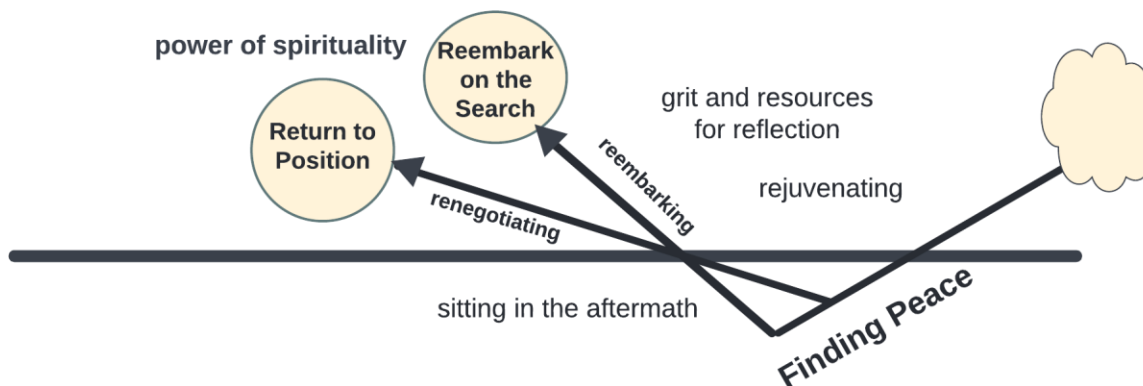
*The Big Kaboom*



This story is not a tragedy, despite the difficult process of navigating gendered and racialized-gendered experiences within the superintendent search and selection process. The strength and agency demonstrated within the lived experiences of the women were apparent.

***Finding peace*** is the moment when the women defined their future. They realized that they were not pawns within the larger game; rather they were agentic and agile. They had the ability to determine their future, despite the challenges presented along the way. As the women described the aftermath of ***The Big Kaboom***, they described stories of resilience. This notion of resilience was apparent across all of the women's experiences and as they navigated the tumultuous landscape of gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. The women also described a strong sense of self, including their identities as women of color, mothers, and educational leaders. They understood and articulated their values. They reaffirmed their identities and because of the transformational experience of ***The Big Kaboom***, to reengage with their core.

Finding peace is holistic in nature and depicts the strength of women themselves. It also represents a bifurcated process; after the disorienting dilemma of ***The Big Kaboom*** women either reembarked on the search process or they renegotiated their current roles. Either path is representative of the agency and resilience of the women and is laden with their power. Figure 5.6 illustrates ***finding peace***.

**Figure 5.6***Finding Peace*

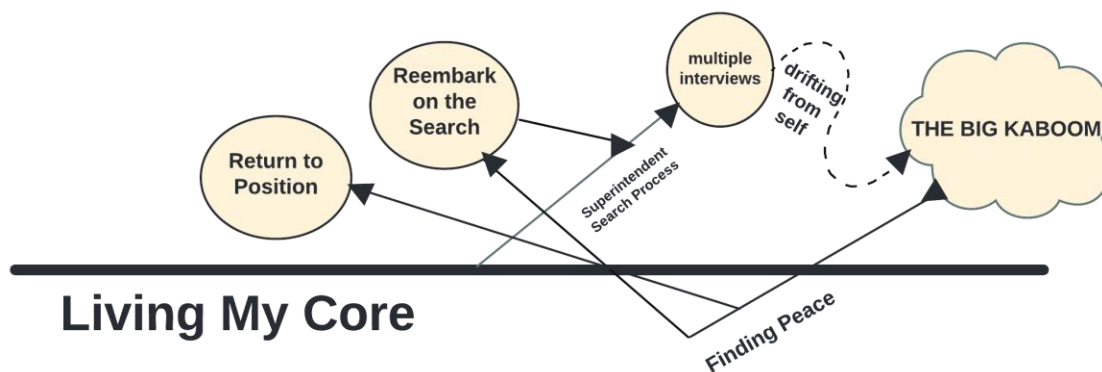
*Finding peace* also highlights the impact of spirituality and the rejuvenating nature of the experience, which for women of color holds meaning as they navigated racialized-gendered experiences and faced challenges associated with the mental models of leadership that favor hegemonic norms. Similar to the phoenix, who rises from the ashes, the women experienced an energized moment of reembarking on their search or returning to their position. As with any disorienting dilemma, there is transformational learning on the other side of the experience. For the women, *finding peace* emerged after *The Big Kaboom*. It is regenerative and rejuvenating. It is the end and the beginning of the story. For the women who chose to return to their positions, there was a sense of comfort and connection to their core values as educational leaders. For the women who reembarked on the process, the odds were in their favor, as 11 of the 18 women in this study were appointed to the superintendency after an average of 5.8 interviews, which was distributed amongst both white women and women of color. There is strength in that story.

## The Final Theoretical Model

The intersectional nature of the experiences for the women who sought the superintendency in this study was remarkable. Overt gendered and racialized-gendered communication, including gendered and racialized-gendered feedback and questioning, was at times shocking and disturbing. This final model depicts the storyline of the women's lived experiences, within the rough landscape that is gendered and racialized-gendered in nature, thus at its praxis is intersectional. Figure 5.7 pulls the concepts together in one final model.

**Figure 5.7**

*Navigating the Gendered and Racial Experiences (Final Model)*



This model illustrates the central image of living my core that intersects with the various dimensional aspects of the process, including the rejuvenating nature of finding peace. This model highlights the strength of the women, despite the challenges presented throughout the process. Notwithstanding *The Big Kaboom*, or because of it, the women are empowered and reenergized to either continue with the search or to return to their previous position with a strong sense of identities and self.

## **Theoretical Propositions**

This study sought to understand the experiences of women who aspire to the superintendency, particularly from the micro level interactions that occur during the interview process. The women who participated in this study shared the similar experience of getting to the final round of the search process and not getting the position, and yet their experiences were not universal, as the women of color faced even tougher challenges. Nestled within this story of shared experience were difficult examples of gendered and racialized-gendered experiences that the women found themselves navigating. This story also elucidated the strength and resilience of the women, despite the horrible board behaviors and challenging, political landscapes. Furthermore, for the women of color, this story is illustrative of the intersectional challenges they faced on their journey. As a result, I have developed three theoretical propositions.

### **Theoretical Proposition I: The Psychological and Emotional Impacts of Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Experiences Affect Women as They Interview for Superintendent Positions.**

*Drifting from self* is the dimension that encompasses the ongoing onslaught of the interview experience. As the women continued with their interviewing, they were often subjected to external feedback that left them questioning themselves. Prior to the interview process, the women had a strong sense of identities. The term identities encompass the multiplicity and intersectional nature of identity. It is not stagnant nor singular. Booysen (2018) noted that there is a constant interplay and construction of identity that occurs within the micro, meso, and macro levels. For the women as they went deeper into the interview process, they found themselves unmoored from their sense of identities, and often were left questioning themselves; in terms of how they interacted, presented, and brought their authentic selves to the interviews. Essentially,



they were in a renegotiated stance within their identities as they confronted the challenges of the search process. Additionally, it seems some women of color found themselves navigating overt racial feedback related to their outward expressions and their appearance, as with Glory, a Latinx woman, was told she needed to “tone it down.”

I used the term *in situ* because reactive responding occurred situated within the interview itself. The women described that during the interview they found themselves adjusting their levels of interactions based on the nonverbal body language and perceived lack of engagement from the board members. Often, the first round of interviews were positive experiences, and the women discussed the positive interactions from the search committee (either the school board or various community forum groups). However, as they entered the second or final round of interviews, they felt visceral changes with the interactions from the board. These included a lack of engagement, negative body language, and at times bad behaviors such as aggressive questioning. These were amplified for women of color. In reaction to the behaviors or lack of engagement, the women responded in various ways, including putting on a “game face,” becoming serious, and giving short or curt answers to the questions. These behaviors exhibited by the women *in situ* may have had negative impacts on the interview itself, including the outcome of the interview.

### ***Provisional Selves, Impression Management, Stereotype Threat, and Interview Anxiety***

Identity research is complex and crosses multiple layers of interactions, from interpersonal and relational interactions to larger, organizational, and societal interactions (Atewologun et al., 2016; Booysen, 2018; Love et al., 2015). One’s identity is cocreated over time, and evolves based on experience, affinity, and through what Ibarra (1999) termed, provisional selves. The notion of provisional selves posits that workplace identities are fluid and

influenced by the behaviors of others in a social setting, particularly within the work context. Members of the organization, including young MBA. students within Ibarra's original work, adapted their workplace identities based on the behaviors of more senior members of the organization. For the women in this study, I believe that a form of provisional selves occurred in situ. Changes in the board behaviors during the second interview, including nonverbal feedback and disengaged behaviors by the board, directly impacted the outward behaviors of the women as they interviewed.

As the women encountered negative nonverbal cues, they adjusted their responses to the interview questions. Furthermore, the compounding nature of the process resulted in reactive responding which in turn, may have created a negative impression of the candidates as they interviewed. Gino et al. (2020) explored what happens when candidates cater to the interviewer preferences during job interviews. They found that if a job candidate catered to the perceived interviewer preferences, rather than presenting their authentic selves during the interview, there was a negative impact on the outcome of the interview. For this proposition, I posit that as the women experienced negative body language and disengaged behaviors, they adjusted, or reactively responded, during the interview. This very likely could have contributed to the outcomes of the interviews, as the women did not bring their authentic selves at that moment to the interview, and for the women of color, this recognizes that their authentic selves are often not represented in the mental models of leadership.

Impression management is a concept from the human resources field and takes the stance that first impressions and outward behaviors can be altered for key audiences (Bolino et al., 2008; Cuddy et al., 2015). As the women engaged in reactive responding, and thus, altered their responses based on the perceived behaviors by the board, they found themselves drifting further

from their core. In addition to the reactive responding that occurred during the interviews, I believe that the women manifested a level of stereotype threat that resulted in an outward presentation incongruent with their authentic selves. For the women of color, they faced the racialized-gendered factors that favor the dominant, hegemonic norm of the superintendency.

Stereotype threat is the fear of being treated in a manner related to negative stereotypes associated with a given group of people (Roberson & Kulik, 2007; Steele et al., 2002). Additionally, Schmader (2010) argued that stereotype threat has an effect on job performance and other tasks, as individuals may internalize this threat and thus, have a negative impact on their job performance. For the women, as they continually experienced negative body language during interviews, they questioned themselves as competent for the position. Cuddy et al. (2015) explored interviewee impressions during job interviews and found that both nonverbal and verbal presence influenced job interviews and their outcomes. In their study, Cuddy et al. (2015) found that candidates who presented with agency and a level of expansiveness, which was described as open stance and broadly posed body positioning, there was a higher level of perceived hireable behaviors as opposed to those with lower levels of expansiveness or timid behaviors.

I believe that as the women in this study confronted various obstacles during the interview process, these compounded in their outward presentation in situ, and may have been amplified for women of color. This may have been a culmination of perceived stereotype threat and provisional selves occurring simultaneously while interviewing. Additionally, Feeney et al. (2015) explored interview anxiety processes for men and women and found that women experienced higher levels of “overall interview anxiety, appearance anxiety, behavioral anxiety, and performance anxiety” (p. 302) during the interview process. Interview anxieties include concerns by the candidate related to impression management, meaning that the candidates are

worried about how they are perceived during the interview (Bolino et al., 2008). Such anxieties may have been evoked during the final interviews in response to the changes in the board behavior. In this study, the women began the process confident and encouraged to pursue the position of superintendent. They also had positive feedback during the first round interviews, and as they went further into the process, the women found themselves grappling with nonverbal feedback and other barriers, which compounded in how the women presented during the final interviews.

As the women went deeper into the interview process for the superintendency, they were confronted with various overt gendered and racialized-gendered experiences. They also received nonverbal and verbal feedback, negative body language, and disengaged behaviors by the board while in the interview itself. For the women of color in this study, such experiences may intertwine within the process as well. In the end, as the women responded to the board behaviors with what they perceived was an appropriate response, the women drifted from their authentic self. This harkens the notion of whether the women were able to bring their authentic selves to the interview process at all; thus, being placed within a double bind and a precarious place of being seen as too agentic or too timid during the process.

### ***The Double Bind***

The double bind is the concept that recognizes reciprocal conflicting social messages that women often receive, especially related to mental models of leadership expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). These can occur through social interactions and mixed message such as leadership role expectations that favor agentic or masculine behaviors, yet when enacted by women are viewed as incongruent to those expectations. Essentially, the double bind is a “gotcha”, where women are given mixed messages and cannot live up to the agentic male

expectations for leadership, or if they do are punished for not adhering to stereotypical female behaviors. As women demonstrate more agentic leadership practices, they often are viewed less favorably, yet when they demonstrate more communal or relational behaviors they are viewed as not having leadership qualities. As the women in this study were *drifting from self*, deeper into the interview process, the women questioned whether they should show assertiveness in their responses. Makayla noted, “if I tried to follow their path [former male superintendents] and kind of their assertiveness, I felt like it just didn’t play well for me” (Makalya).

Varghese et al. (2018) looked at the hirability perceptions of women through the lens of the double bind, and found that hybrid style impression management techniques, meaning the combination of agentic behaviors that exuded confidence coupled with social perceptions of warmth yielded higher levels of hirability for women candidates. The women in this study faced considerable challenges and questionable feedback, including overtly gendered and racialized-gendered feedback, all of which I believe left them unsure at times on how to engage and answer in a manner that would yield a favorable hirability rating. Indeed, the women were placed in a precarious situation and double bind for hiring, and for women of color the stakes are higher and even more perilous.

### ***Myth of Authentic Selves***

Authentic leadership as coined by Gardner et al. (2005) holds to the notion that leaders may bring their true selves to the work of leadership. This means that as human actors within the frame of leadership, leaders are able to fully bring their whole selves into the organization. However, there is some mythology to that notion. Undergirding the concept of authentic leadership is a dominant, hegemonic normative view of leadership itself that favors white men. This can leave little space for people who do not fit that dominant hegemonic norm, including

white women and especially women of color. For the superintendency, the dominant norm continues to be white and male. Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) argued that authentic leadership is contextual at best, and that for white women and even more for women of color, it is a problematic enterprise. This is due to the overall normative nature of organizations, which favor the dominant paradigm of leadership.

In the context of the superintendent search and selection process, the women who participated in this study shared that they were conflicted during the interviews. It was difficult for them to fully bring their full selves to the interview, and changes in their outward engagement with the board, including how they answered questions during the interviews, exemplify the mythological notion that authentic leadership is just a matter of enacting your true self. Given the bad behavior from the board, and the psychological and emotional implications that arose as the women were deeper into the process, it was difficult for the women to bring their true selves to the interview, despite having a strong sense of identity.

**Theoretical Proposition II: The Women Who Seek the Superintendency Demonstrate Resilience and a Strong Sense of Self Despite the Negative Impacts of the Interview Process.**

Central to the findings is the dimension *living my core*. *Living my core* represents the fortitude and strength within the women themselves; they understood their core selves, including their various identities, as educational leaders, spouses, and peers. Throughout the women's depictions of their experiences during the superintendent search and selection process was language laden with purpose and strength. Miscenko and Day (2016) defined identity as multifarious in nature and coconstructed within the social arena. For the women in this study, their understanding of their professional identity, personal identity, and core values was

omnipotent. Figure 5.8 is a word cloud created with language directly from the women who participated in this study, from the coding related to their sense of self.

**Figure 5.8**

*Word Cloud from In Vivo language Related to Sense of Self*



The language used included words such as decision maker, data person, successful, and included their professional positions such as deputy superintendent. It was clear that the women had a strong sense of self and identities as they embarked on the journey. And despite the negative impacts of the process, including gendered and racial experiences, the women held tight to their sense of self. At times, they did find themselves *drifting from self*; however, this was often during the final round interview and the in the aftermath of *The Big Kaboom*. As the women surfaced from their disorienting dilemma, *The Big Kaboom*, they found themselves returning to a sense of peace and strength. Figure 5.9 compliments Figure 5.8, with language that describes the resilience and fortitude of the women, again, derived directly from the coding and in vivo language of the women.





they traveled the journey and found peace with the process. Dobie and Hummel (2001) found that spirituality was a positive enabling factor for women in the superintendency. In the case of this study, it was part of the women's core self and contributed to their sense of peace after *The Big Kaboom*.

It is also important to reflect on the voices of women that were not included within this study, and those who may take longer to resolve or may not come to terms with *The Big Kaboom*. While the women in this study primarily articulated their sense of strength and peace after moving through *The Big Kaboom*, I am left wondering if that would be true for all women? The experience of navigating the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences is tough and brutal. Women are subjected to overt gendered and racialized-gendered communication coupled with the pain of job search rejection and therefore, despite the strength and conviction of the women in this study, this might not be the experience for all women who seek the superintendency and face rejection.

**Theoretical Proposition III: Multiple Attempts and Interviews May Yield Positive Results and Possibly the Superintendency for Women Who Seek It.**

Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as “perseverance and passion for long term goals” (p. 1087). An interesting finding from this study is the number of times women interviewed for the position of superintendent; those who applied and interviewed multiple times (i.e., more than five interviews) tended to land the position based on demographic data collected on the number of interviews versus the final outcomes of the interviews as 11 of the 18 participants landed the position. This may be attributed to the concept of grit, as the women who continued along the path, despite navigating difficult situations and experiencing failure, were likely to obtain the position. Within the codes for this study were multiple mentions of the word failure. Diane, who

was a superintendent at the time of her interview commented, “It’s okay to fail. Failure is part of a growth curve” (Diane).

Embracing failure was a key element that emerged from the language of the participants. There was an overwhelming theme of sticking with the process, despite the ups and downs of the search. Popoola and Karadas (2022) explored the relationship between grit and the perceived glass ceiling for women and found that women who had optimistic and positive levels of grit had a lower perception of the glass ceiling. This may have been related to the women’s overall positivity and stick withitness for those who participated in the study. However, it is aligned to the experiences of the women in this study; they stuck with the process and eventually it yielded a positive result. This was true for both white women and women of color, as five of the eight women of color eventually landed the position.

This was an unexpected theoretical proposition, as this study aimed to better understand the experience after women were in the second or final round of superintendent interviews but did not get the position. However, based on the demographic data collected as part of the informed consent, it was clear that multiple attempts at the position were common for the women who did obtain the superintendency and equally shared amongst white women and women of color.

### ***Problematization of Grit***

While no statistical modeling was used on the demographic data that implied that multiple attempts may yield the superintendency, for this study the 11 women who participated and were sitting superintendents had an average of 5.8 interviews prior to attaining the position, and five of the 11 were women of color. There is not an intention with this proposition to make an absolute claim that multiple interviews will equate to gaining the position. Structural barriers

to the position are rampant and multiplied for women of color, who do not benefit from the privilege afforded by whiteness. There was extreme bad behavior by the boards, and while I looked at the problem through the lived experiences of the women who interviewed for the position, I did not explore the problem through the view of the board members. However, I believe that the descriptions of grit presented by the women who participated in this study were evident.

There is also an inherent problem with the notion of grit, as it places onus on the woman to persevere despite challenges that are out of their zone of influence. It also makes assumptions that grit is either a personality trait, positive factor, or a stamina skill that can be taught (Credé, 2018). This type of thinking may absolve the greater issues within the search process. The structural problems inherent within the superintendency search and selection process are a key lever in the female leadership gap, and yet, grit only applies to the fortitude of the women to keep on with the search process. The levels of overt gendered and racialized-gendered communication, coupled with structural power issues may very well have been a factor that resulted in the grit demonstrated by the women. At the core, the problem lies not within the women's ability to persevere, especially for women of color who have to endure overt and benevolent racialized-gendered experiences and persevere, but within the overall structure of power and access. Only focusing on the impact of grit, and not the structures and power that result in the need for grit as it applies to the superintendent search process, inappropriately clears the power structure from responsibility toward increasing equity in the position.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

This study sought to better understand what the superintendent search and selection process was like for the women who make it to the final round of superintendent interviews but

do not get offered the position. One strength of the study was the diversity of the participants who resided in various geographic locations across the United States. Participants were located in the midwest, northeast, southeast, deep south, and mid Atlantic. Additionally, the purposeful sample yielded a range of demographic factors such as race and ethnicity, with women who identified as Black, white, mixed race, and Latinx. Having a diverse group of participants allowed the study to benefit from a range of experiences and diversity in the voices of the women. Despite having a range of geographic locations, I did not get participants from the northwest region of the United States, which proved to be a limitation of this study. Furthermore, the women who participated all identified as heterosexual cisgender female. There were no participants that identified as homosexual or transgendered. These factors were a limitation to this study. Finally, as noted within Chapter IV as a foregrounded context, my role as a white, lesbian woman may have impacted the level of unspoken experiences of women of color and may have been a limitation to the study.

A standard for qualitative studies face is trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is akin to quantitative studies use of generalizability (Mathison, 2011). For this study, 18 women were interviewed, and interviewing ended when the study met saturation of data. Saturation is when no new concepts emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Another assurance of trustworthiness for this study was the constant comparative process, which yielded 60 plus pages of memos, 300 pages of transcripts, 1,300 plus codes applied over 2,000 times within the data. This is a considerable strength of this study, as I continually engaged with the data throughout, and rereviewed the data for potential missed or unspoken experiences of the women of color who participated. Additionally, I utilized member checking processes where the participants reviewed their transcripts and a coding team that assisted in the coding of the transcripts, all of which

heightened the trustworthiness of this study. Qualitative research does not aim to make generalizable assertions from the findings, rather, qualitative research seeks to elucidate the human experience (J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a constructivist grounded theory study, this dissertation aimed to do that; to bring forth the experiences that occurred within the superintendent search and selection process for the women who aspired to the position.

### **Implications for Leading Change**

The female leadership gap in the school superintendency is a troublesome reality. It is even more troublesome for the lack of representation of women of color in the position. As noted at the onset of this chapter, the ILO Group published a report regarding the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the female leadership gap and the superintendency (ILO Group, 2022). The results were not positive, and women were adversely affected by the resignations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that 77% of our public school preK–12 teachers identify as female, the inverse remains for those who fill the superintendent position, which remains predominately white and male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b; Tienken, 2021). This study sought to look at this problem from a micro lens, by focusing on the women who aspire to the superintendency, and who have experienced the final round of selection without getting the position.

The selection process for the superintendency continues to favor the dominant, hegemonic norm and is overwhelmingly white and male, which is further underscored by the 2022 data from the ILO Group. Despite various diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts like those promoted by the National School Boards Association in their 2021 report (National School Boards Association, 2021), which call for increased diversity within public school leadership. The dimensions that emerged from this study illustrate several problems within the

superintendent search and selection process. These problems provide a catalyst for change within the current status quo as it relates to the superintendent search and selection process and improvements with the preparation of leaders and leadership pipeline for female aspirants to include support for interviewing. From the onset of this study, I posited the use of problematization, rather than traditional gap spotting. Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) argued for the use of problematization as a means of obtaining novel research; research that focuses on inherent structural issues such as the aim of this dissertation.

### **Implication Problem I: School Board Diversity Training may not be Working**

Diversity trainings can take on a variety of forms, from overall cultural competency training to more detailed and focused training on implicit bias. Implicit biases are those unconscious stereotypes that can often create mental models regarding various persons and their identities (Bendick & Nunes, 2012; Onyeador et al., 2021). Implicit bias training focuses on helping participants understand their underlying biases and how these work in unconscious ways, including in hiring practices. This type of training has gained momentum across a variety of organizations in recent years and often addresses the unconscious stereotyping that exists within organizations on both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

### ***Implicit Bias and Implicit Bias Training***

Implicit biases within recruitment and selection for hiring has been explored more recently, as focus on the various diversity gaps within the workforce have come under scrutiny recently (Onyeador et al., 2021). Public school boards typically are tasked with the selection of the superintendent, and despite a national push for greater understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion, the number of women and women of color in the superintendency have risen only marginally, despite these efforts. Bendick and Nunes (2012) explored the effects of hiring bias

through a detailed review of hiring bias literature and found disheartening results; despite Federal mandates and national movements to improve diversity hiring within organizations there has been little momentum on that front.

Pennington (2020) penned an essay on the state of diversity training and cited abundant evidence that despite corporate and higher education initiatives on implicit bias training there has been little growth in diversity at the highest level. He posited that implicit bias training is still not making an impact on the lived experiences of marginalized people in the workplace. This certainly may be the case for the selection of superintendents. Chamberlin (2016) highlighted the inner dialogue that can be at play in terms of hiring practices, as the interviewer often makes split second decisions regarding candidates upon the first meeting impressions. Additionally, the compounding narrative that women are less capable of leaderful work such as leading financial decisions and demonstrating agentic behaviors may also be at play within the school board hiring practices. Even though women make up a large number of school board members (National School Boards Association, 2021), the hiring outcomes continue to reflect the possibility of implicit bias towards white women and women of color.

### ***Racially-Gendered Outcomes***

Schein (1973) first coined the notion of “think manager think male” in her work with MBA students. In 2011, Bosak and Sczesny looked at simulated hiring situations and found consistent results, with male candidates more likely to be “selected” for hire. The school superintendency is no different, and while women candidates are quick to make the short list of finalists, they are less likely to land the position. Bernal et al. (2017) conducted a mixed methods study on the gendered nature of the superintendency and found pervasive gendered biases were encountered amongst the female participants in their study. The role the school board plays in the

leadership gap cannot be denied. The school board members are tasked with the recruitment and selection process, and for the women in this study, the school board played an influential role during the interview process and in the selection of the candidate for the position. Therefore, supporting school boards with explicit training regarding hiring biases is imperative (O'Meara et al., 2020).

Our nation's public school boards continue to appoint white males into the position, despite national diversity initiatives. This has been confirmed by the 2022 ILO report on the superintendency, with a negative impact on the number of female superintendents for the largest school districts, with 36% of positions previously filled by women being filled by men (ILO Group, 2022). White (2021) conducted an analysis of the first names of public school superintendents which confirmed the known female leadership gap in the superintendency. In their study, White created a database of first names of nearly all of the sitting superintendents in 2019–2020 from a variety of data sources, including state organizations and comprehensive search engines and found that indeed, the United States continues to have a gender gap in the superintendency. I posit this is partially due to the hiring decisions by public school boards, and the implications may suggest that diversity training has not improved the racially-gendered outcomes of the position.

### ***Diversity Training is Not Enough***

Given the gender gap and the diversity, equity, and inclusion focus for the nation's public school boards, it is clear that diversity training may not be enough to close the female leadership gap. In 2022, the National Football League's Rooney Rule came into the spotlight after a series of text messages revealed that despite people of color making it to the final round of NFL coaching position interviews, hiring decisions were still favoring white male candidates



(Franklin, 2022). The NFL's Rooney Rule which requires NFL teams to interview candidates of color did not positively impact the coach hiring decisions, which are continually skewed towards white male hires. The diversity gap persists in the NFL despite change efforts, and it appears that placating candidates by including them on the short list but not hiring them is one example of the failed attempts of organizations to increase diversity.

This study did not include matched pairing with school board members and therefore lacks their voice in the process. However, it is clear that the female leadership gap continues to be a thorny problem for our public school districts, and the implications are clear that whatever diversity training is occurring at the school board level is not yielding more appointments of women and women of color to the position. For the leadership field, there are ripe opportunities to address the female leadership gap within the superintendency, especially from the perspective of school board hiring practices, and enhancing diversity goal setting at a systemic level.

**Implication II: Leadership Pipelines Need to Include Interview Training for Female Aspirants.**

This study highlighted the impact of the nonverbal behaviors of interviewers on the interviewees during the interview process. For the women in this study, they often engaged in *reactive responding* to the board nonverbal feedback. This is related to the findings of Feeney et al. (2015) which associated applicant anxiety during interviews with interview outcomes. This anxiety surfaced in various forms during the interview process. I posit that this was what occurred for the women as they adjusted their responses based on nonverbal body language and disengaged behaviors by the school board members during the interview. Compounding this paradigm is an understanding that the interviewers, who in this study were the school board members, make split second judgments during the interview (Varghese et al., 2018). Therefore, I

believe that the leadership pipelines could benefit from interview training for women who seek the superintendency. This training must focus on self regulation strategies during the interviews themselves. This assertion does not absolve the larger, structural power issues within the superintendent selection process and should not be viewed as such.

### ***Micro Level Interactions***

The data described various levels of board behavior and nonverbal body language on a micro level. Levine and Feldman (2002) looked at nonverbal behaviors of candidates during interviews and found that women who displayed more agentic nonverbal behaviors such as sitting stiffly (posture) and holding eye contact were ranked less favorably than women who appeared more relaxed in their posture and who varied their eye contact. Additionally, varied levels of smiling were ranked highly favorable versus no smiling during the interview. Similar findings of body posturing were confirmed by Cuddy et al. (2015). This suggests that for the women who seek the superintendency, micro level interactions such as body language may play a role in likability and perhaps in selection.

### ***Impression Management***

Impression management refers to interpersonal techniques performed to alter the image one projects to a targeted audience (Bolino et al., 2008). Highly researched in the context of the human resource management discourse, impression management can be applied in the interview setting, where the interviewee adjusts their outward impressions, for example their affect or their body posturing, to meet the perceived target audience. Wilhelmy et al. (2016) looked at impression management in terms of the behaviors of interviewers in terms of the applicant, and the images they project towards applicants during the interview process. They found that certain behaviors such as distancing and note taking were rated as intimidating by applicants. For the

women who participated in my study, they often noted distancing behaviors by the board, in terms of nonverbal cues, lack of engagement as well as bad behaviors like aggressive questioning.

Impression management is a two fold process; the impressions that are given by the interviewee or candidate and the impressions projected by the interviewers. Situated within this space are issues of gender and racial implicit bias, and for the women in this study, overt gendered and racial communicating, and feedback. Together, the interactions between the disengaged board and the women during the interview, impression management may have been a factor. Additionally, as the women navigated feedback that was incongruent to their first round interviews, they found themselves in a reactive stance. Leadership preparation programs and formal and informal pipelines should prepare women for these challenges so that they are able to engage in interviews despite impression management or projected stances.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined the female leadership gap within the public school superintendency in the United States and looked at the selection process from the micro level for the women who make it to the final round of the process and are ultimately not selected. Because of this focus, the study did not include the perspectives of the school board members and search consultants. Future researchers may consider examining the phenomenon from the perspective of the school board members, in order to gain the perspective of the experience from those who are tasked with the final decision. Additionally, research on the effects of implicit bias, sex stereotyping, and the impacts of mental models in relation to high stakes selection process is warranted, especially in the arena of public education. Furthermore, given the negative impacts of the

COVID-19 pandemic on the state of the superintendency for women leaders, future research on the impacts of major change within organizations and selection of leaders may be useful.

The scope of this study included a sample of women who met the criteria of getting to the final round of the superintendent search and selection process and who ultimately were not offered the position. This purposeful sample did not preclude those women who eventually did land the position of superintendent. Future research may benefit from adjusting the sampling to include only those women who had yet to obtain the position. This may give insights into the experiences of the aspirants within the job search rejection frame. This study unearthed the experience within the second interview and how women reactively responded based on school board behaviors. This warrants possible future research in order to support women as they seek to advance their careers.

Future researchers may seek to engage transgender women and women who identify as homosexual. These are two demographics that are grossly understudied within the school leadership literature and given the sensitivity of the subject and public nature of the superintendency, may be difficult to engage for future researchers. Lesbians and transwomen were not intentionally excluded from this study, however they may have self selected out due to feeling vulnerable in the search process; perhaps a study focused on the experience of lesbian and transwomen would be perceived as a safer space in which to participate. Additionally, future researcher may research the number of interviews that it takes men to reach the superintendency compared to their female counterparts. Furthermore, a collaborative research approach with a mixed-race group of researchers that include Black Indigenous Women of Color (BIWOC) as part of the research team may further elicit unspoken experiences with the women of color's experience.

This study and the focus on the female leadership gap is extremely timely research. Despite efforts to increase diversity, the public school superintendent continues to reflect the dominant hegemonic norm. Continued research that looks at the public school superintendent, gender, race, and the role of the school board in the selection process must be prioritized. Future researchers can add value to the field by engaging research that further illuminates the problem from multiple angles, including from the aspect of school board members and their perceptions of the process.

### **Personal Reflections on Leading Change and Conclusion**

I embarked on this dissertation journey with a feminist stance, as I was perplexed with the lack of women seated in the position of the public school superintendent. Over time, as I honed my research question, it was clear that constructivist grounded theory was the perfect methodological fit. Indeed, it was. As Schatzman (1992) aptly noted, “What all is going on here?” (p. 310), and undeniably, I unearthed much more than I had expected. Chapter I highlighted my positionality and the importance of researcher reflexivity. Over the course of this study, I created nearly 60 pages of memos that recorded the research process. The power of the memo writing process was undeniable, and I relish the content held within these documents. Each interview I conducted was a sacred event. Prior to each interview, I found the use of breath work to be a powerful tool for centering and bringing myself fully to the process and the moment. As a scholar practitioner, I found that music also aided in this process, and in the moments before my interviews, I listened to a different artist and song. This ritual helped me to pivot from the practitioner stance to that of researcher. Each song was documented within my memo log and is a cherished playlist that now represents a special time of learning for me on my journey.

The findings in this study are impactful to say the least. As I understood the micro level focus would most likely yield difficult concepts and themes, I am in awe at what transpired. There are two major findings that I believe will impact the field of school leadership in positive ways. One is the dimension, *drifting from self*. Given the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences widespread throughout the superintendent search process, women who seek the position would benefit from leadership pipeline support in regard to interview preparation. Those tasked with creating such pipeline programs, such as state and national leadership organizations and local school districts, have the power and influence to make these programs of support a reality. Too often, the mixed messages, double binds, glass ceilings, and concrete floors impact women beyond measure. Additionally, we owe it to women to help them navigate behaviors from the school board members during the final round of interviews. Often, women who are immersed in the superintendent search process may find themselves feeling confident after the first round of interviews, and then encounter nonverbal feedback or poor behavior from the school board members that rattles them during the interview. Given this, new pipeline and support programs should help women understand that they may inevitably encounter such behaviors during the second round interviews and empower women to recognize and move through such behaviors. We must do better for those women who embark on the superintendent search process, especially for those moments of bad behavior they will likely encounter. This is imperative.

Second, I believe that structural and power changes must be considered from the perspective of school board selection processes. This is an under studied and greatly influential factor that warrants future research and possible reform. Critical theories, such as critical feminist theory, critical race theory, critical queer theory, critical disabilities studies, and LatCrit

theory push our thinking to recognize the subjugation and oppression of marginalized people from a systemic and power based lens. This study highlighted the structural imbalance and deeply rooted effects of leadership mental models on the opportunities for women and the superintendency. It is these structural imbalances that continue to keep women from the highest role in public education. While I did not dive deeply into the role of the school board and the systemic, structural, and power based issues that contribute, I believe that the field of educational leadership would benefit greatly from reimagining the roles that school board members play in the appointment of school superintendents, and what supports can be put in place to increase diversity within the position. This may require a look at the demographic makeup of the school boards themselves.

The experiences and insights held within this study are important. The women who seek the superintendency are important. The field of education deserves diversity at the highest level, all of which will require systemic changes within the power structures that can often serve as gatekeepers to the position. As a scholar and practitioner in leadership and change, I have learned much from this experience. Conducting an independent research project of this scale was powerful. My growth as a researcher, leader of change, and as a woman is undeniable, and I believe as I continue to grow as a scholar and practitioner, I will utilize the power that is research praxis in ways that lift up and support women who seek leadership positions.

For the women who seek high profile leadership positions such as the superintendency or beyond, the experiences held within this dissertation may ring true for their journeys. Furthermore, while these salient themes were powerful, they do not represent all the voices and experiences of the collective, including those voices that are often silenced through power dynamics and I recognize not everyone's experience has been represented within these themes.

However, it is my hope that the insights contained within this dissertation add value to the field of women's leadership studies, especially for those female superintendent aspirants as they bump up against the rough and jagged nature of the gendered and racialized-gendered experiences along the way.

Changing systems is difficult work. The first step is often elucidating the problem. This study has done just that; it has looked at the micro level interactions that occur during the superintendent search process and has brought forth what the process is like for the women who have experienced it firsthand. Asking hard questions and utilizing the power that is inherent in research praxis is one step towards making meaningful change. Together, as a community, we can build upon the concepts within this study to impact the field at large, including the needed structural changes within school board practices during the superintendent search and selection process and through ongoing leadership development programs for women. The time is now.



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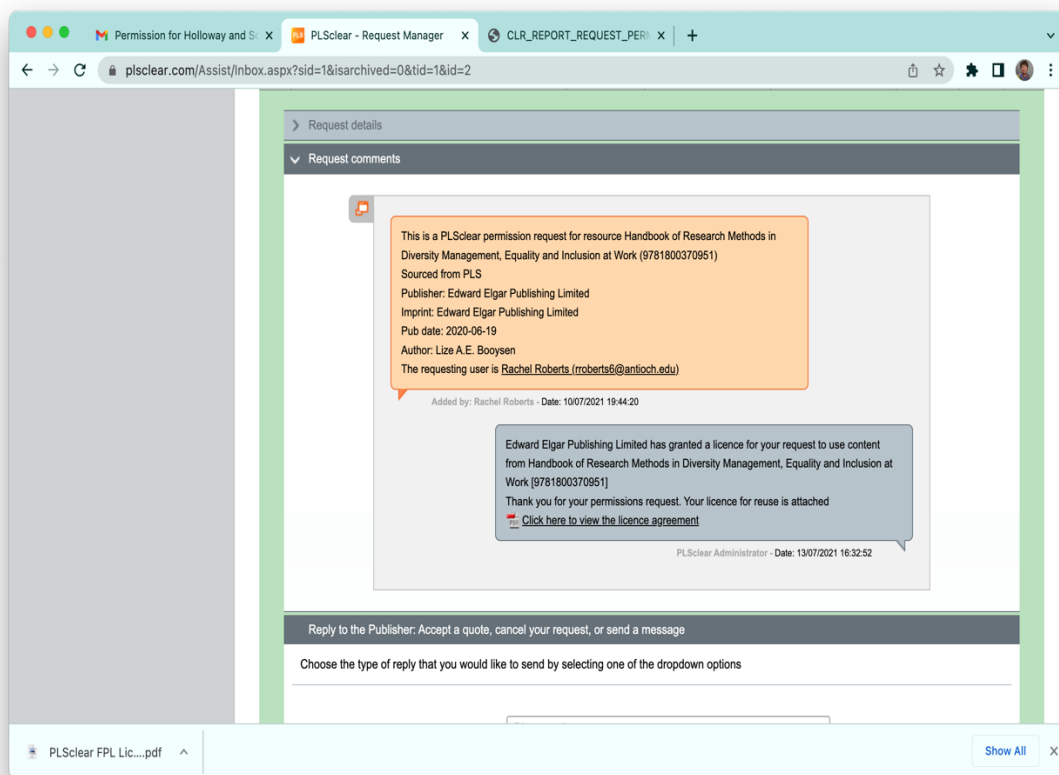
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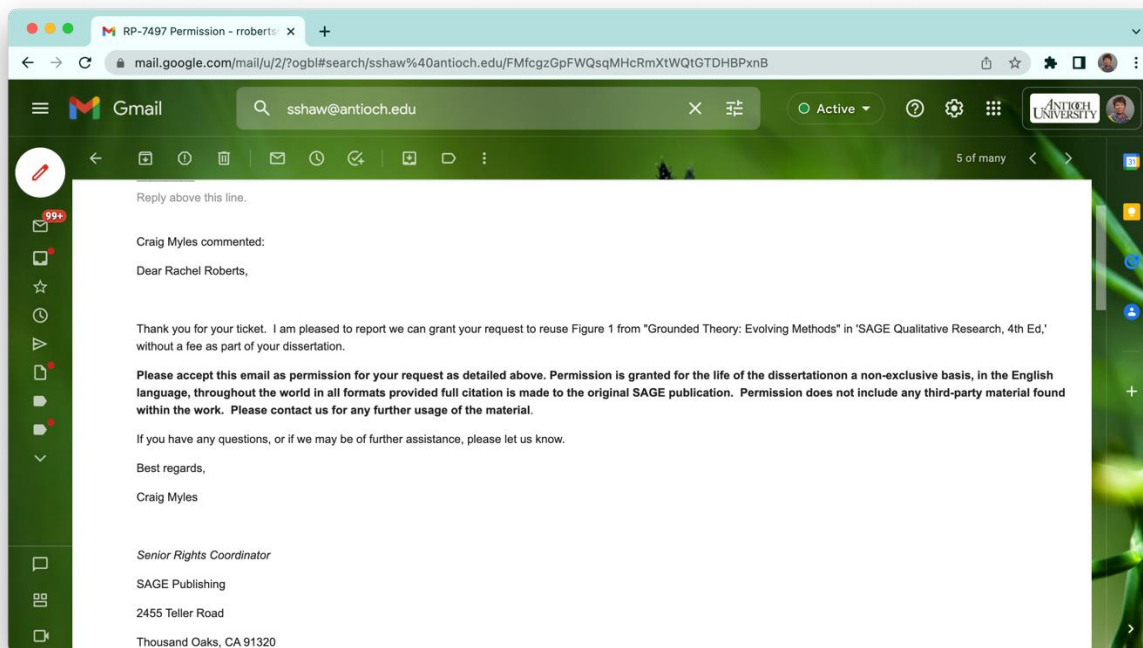


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## APPENDIX A: PERMISSION FROM EDGAR



## APPENDIX B: PERMISSION FROM SAGE



## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT LETTER

### Recruitment Letter to State/National Organization

September 15, 2021

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Rachel M. Roberts, and I am a PhD candidate in Antioch University's Graduate School of Leadership and Change.

I am currently recruiting participants for my grounded theory dissertation study entitled, "Women and the Superintendency: A Look at the Female Leadership Gap", which focuses on women and the superintendency; specifically, the experience of women who have interviewed for the position of school superintendent but did not get offered the position.

Women who have applied for the position of superintendent, interviewed, and were subsequently not offered the position are eligible to participate. Additionally, current women who are superintendents that have had the experience in the past (i.e., applied previously and did not get the offer) are also eligible to participate. Interested participants will be interviewed via Zoom for roughly one hour.

Given that my dissertation research requires participants who are female and who have participated in the interview process for the school superintendency, I believe that your organization may have members who meet this criterion, and therefore, I am hopeful that I may utilize your organization in my recruitment process.

Please let me know the process for such academic research, including your organization's policy on dissertation research recruitment.

I thank you for your time and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

*Rachel M. Roberts*

Rachel M. Roberts  
PhD Candidate  
Antioch University

## **APPENDIX D: LINKEDIN LANGUAGE**

LinkedIn Language for Recruitment  
Women and the Superintendency  
PI: Rachel M. Roberts

LinkedIn Community: I am seeking participants for my dissertation research on women applying for the superintendency.

The purpose of this study is to understand experience of women applicants for the public school superintendency, particularly women who have applied for the position of superintendent but did not get the job.

Participation will include a brief survey (about 15 minutes to complete) and a 1:1 interview via Zoom (lasting roughly one hour). This study is part of dissertation research on women and leadership for fulfillment of the Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership and Change at Antioch University's Graduate School of Leadership and Change.

Benefits of participation include the opportunity to share your experiences regarding women and leadership and the school superintendency, and what the interview and selection process may have been like for you!

Requirements for participation includes the following:

- Participants must identify as women
- Participants must have applied for and interviewed in the final round for the position of school superintendent in a public school district in the United States
- Participants must have not been offered the position after the interview

Current superintendents are encouraged to participate as long as they have had the experience of applying for, interviewing, and not being offered the position in the past.

To participate in this study, please email Rachel M. Roberts at\_\_\_\_\_.

## APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: **Women and the Superintendency: A Look at the Female Leadership Gap**

Project Investigator: **Rachel M. Roberts**

Dissertation Chair: **Dr. Lize Booysen**

1. I understand that this study is of a research nature. It may offer no direct benefit to me.
2. Participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to enter it or may withdraw at any time without creating any harmful consequences to myself. I understand also that the investigator may drop me at any time from the study.
3. The purpose of this study is to understand the superintendent interview process from the perspective of female applicants who have interviewed for the position and not been offered the job.
4. As a participant in the study, I will be asked to take part in the following procedures: Completion of a Survey Monkey demographic survey and a virtual face-to-face interview with the PI, Rachel M. Roberts via Zoom.
5. Participants in the study will take roughly 1.5 hours of my time and will take place virtually via Zoom meeting software.
6. The risks, discomforts and inconveniences of the above procedures may include emotional triggers due to the nature of the topic and sensitivity related to the interview process and disappointment in not being offered the position.
7. The possible benefits of the procedure might be:
  1. Direct benefit to me: an opportunity to share your experiences and provide insights into the process of interviewing and for female leadership.
  2. Benefits to others: potential benefits include increasing knowledge on the experiences of female leaders and the superintendency, including the interview process.
8. Personal identifiers will be removed, and the de-identified information may be used for future research without additional consent.
9. Information about the study was discussed with me by Rachel M. Roberts. If I have further questions, I can call her at\_\_\_\_\_.
10. Though the purpose of this study is primarily to fulfill my requirement to complete a formal research project as a dissertation at Antioch University, I also intend to include the data and results of the study in future scholarly publications and presentations. Our confidentiality agreement, as articulated above, will be effective in all cases of data sharing.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Rachel M. Roberts, at telephone \_\_\_\_\_ or email \_\_\_\_\_. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Lisa Kreeger

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F: LIST OF CODES

About me	Are men asked if they can make hard decisions
Accepting the circumstance	Ask board if have a chance
Act charismatic	Ask for feedback
Act convincing in interview	Asked about district data
Acted educator jargon	Asked for tour when got job
acted like assertive	Asked others about districts
Acting assertive didn't work	Asked relationship questions
Admin assistant tells about presentation cart	Asked to do things at work
Affected me	Asking for pointers
Aftermath was traumatizing	Avoided and agreed
Aligned values won't feel like constant battle	Bad taste in mouth
All for the best	Battled mother about leaving husband for job
Almost better when didn't get to second round	Be at beck and call of board
Almost gave up	Be honest
Already knew didn't get the job	Be seen as a person
Alternate pathway	Be yourself
Alternative certification	Became assistant superintendent
Always been successful	Became principal early in career
Always got to second round	Become part of the community
Annoyed	Because of pandemic, no community interviews
Answered differently with a list	Been on both sides
Answered scenarios	Been successful in career
Answered with eye contact	Been through many challenges
Answering assertively	Before COVID
Answering like a man would	Being Christian
Answers board questions about community with yes	Being distracted
Answers composed	Being in cycle forever would be unhappy
Answers on point	Being more careful in interviews
Answers Questions	Being naive
Answers salary question wishy washy	Being paranoid about everything
Answers very serious	Being self not working well
Anticipated the questions	Being short woman
Applied after doctorate	Being very selective about where to apply
Applied for 3 positions	Best worst experience
Applied for 5 positions	Big kaboom
Applied for part time superintendent jobs	Big kaboom helped me
Applied in high minority district	Bit of a fight to move up
Applied in home district	Bitter
Applied to dream district	Bitter about process
Approach interview like practice	Blow back from sharing personal info
Are male candidates asked about parenting?	BOARD BEHAVIOR

Board body language	Can't keep doing it
Board building needs help	Can't prepare for actual experience
Board building was a dump	Candidates unknown
Board didn't know jargon	Change what wearing
Board didn't support previous sup	Characteristics of Who Got Job
Board disengaged	Children in college
Board doesn't want to hear	Choked on water
Board feedback not peppy enough	Choosing interview over family
Board goes against community	Choosing me would be a repeat of boss
Board made wrong choice	Clear gender disparity
Board member gave positive feedback	Clear that she couldn't stay after not getting job
Board member questions jargon	Coached on interviewing
Board questions why no doctorate	Coached to bring artifacts to interview
Board room set up weird	Coached to interview
Board said candidate had more experience	Code switching dress
Board treated men better	Come to terms with it
Board used interim superintendent to do the search	Comfortable with process
Board wanted a man	Comfortable with self
Boards all men	Comment that it would hard to be a principal/mom
Boss mentored me	Community conflict with current sup
Boss put board in place	Community ed director
Both committed to jobs	Community interview strong
bottom fell out	Community wants her
Bounce back	Compared to other candidate
Brains love stories	Compassionate about public ed
Break it again	Competent vs confident
Break the ice	Competing against male
Bring family to interview	Concentrate
Brought artifacts	Concerned about lack of women leaders
Build yourself up	Connect personally
Bullshit	Connect with the panel
Burn at all ends	Connect with women
Burn bridges	Consciously presenting self
Business focused	Conservative state
Buzz words in education	Consider applying again
Called for second interview	Considers leaving job
Called man by his name	Console team
Can't be assertive or submissive	Consultant call back
Can't be defined by not getting the job	Consultant encouraged to keep going
Can't change gender	Consultant tells her to wear other clothes
Can't come for less	consultants
Can't do it between 8-5 not doing it	consultants build relationships
Can't go deep into feelings	Consultants will keep top candidates at the top



Consultants won't prepare me	Didn't do self justice
Coping by reading and introspection	Didn't elaborate on personal situation
Core values	Didn't feel genuine self
Could have said politically correct answers	Didn't finish application after interview
Could write the book on interviews	Didn't get it don't understand
Couldn't come down to that	Didn't get second interview
Courageous conversation	Didn't get the position
COVID changed format	Didn't get true feedback from board
Crap	Didn't have a shot from beginning
Cringy	Didn't know other candidate
Crisis of confidence	Didn't know you could have notes in interview
CRT hot button	Didn't like it
Current politics are nasty	Didn't make sense
Current superintendent dealing with ugly politics	Didn't network
Curriculum and instruction expertise	Didn't practice with women
Cut after the first round	Didn't share with coworkers
Cynical	Didn't sting
Dad was hard worker	Didn't take loss well
Danced around it	Didn't think genuine self did well with interviews
Darker moments	Didn't understand how to convey self during interview
Data person	Didn't use notes
Daughter gets sick/emergency surgery	Didn't want to be hopeful
Daughter tells her to go	Didn't want to be wishy washy
Decided that is the way it is	Didn't want to do it anymore
Decides not to bring presentation	Didn't want to give answers she couldn't come through
Decides to get doctorate	Didn't want to make people sick
Decline third interview b/c values	Didn't wear lipstick
Declined second interview b/c values	Different expectation for women
Defer to others	Different people in audience
Deflated	Difficult
Deflated balloon	Difficult to get interviews
Deflating	Difficult to get vested
Defeated	Disappointed in board for decision
Demonstrate operational knowledge	Disappointment
Depressed	Disheartening
Depressing	Disillusioned by job
Determined to like current job	Distractions during interview
Deviate from self	District didn't follow mask mandate
Devine intervention	District felt inviting
Devastating to confidence	District not political fit
did good	District with DEI focus
Didn't apply b/c family	Districts used consultants
Didn't apply b/c mascot	Do I look like a superintendent

Do other women change their answers and selves	Early on was more myself
Do other women feel like this?	Easygoing
Do others handle loss different	Education mostly female
Do what I need to	Either they like me or not
Dodged a bullet	Emersed into community
Does school board think that she is not acting like a woman	Emotional process
Doesn't follow up on who got the job	Emotionally harder and harder
Doesn't mean to be critical of men	Encouraged to apply by board members
Doesn't want to believe it is because of being a woman	Encouraged to apply by husband/consultant
Doesn't want to believe stereotypes	Entire process got worse
Doesn't want to make excuses because of a woman	Epiphany
Doing the best now	Every no was emotional
Don't be surprised by the expected IV	Everything happens for a reason
Don't believe in BS	Exciting to be interviewed
Don't dwell in negative	Exhausting
Don't get full picture of district from write up	Expectation put on self
Don't go there	Experience and opportunity
Don't have to do politics in current role	Experience woke me up
Don't hear back from consultants	Extend contract
Don't intend to come off mad	Extraneous Codes
Don't know if I want that	Failure
Don't know who I am	Failure is about not being your best in the moment
Don't like buzzwords	Faith
Don't look for jobs	Family and wine
Don't put eggs in one basket	Family can't hold you back
Don't think I am what they wanted	Family Dynamics
Don't think your current role is the only one	Family in old district
Don't want to blame being a woman for not getting job	Family under microscope
Don't want to change self	Farther in interviewing less like self
Don't want to move family	feedback
Don't wear a suit	Feedback she didn't show self
Done with dream of being superintendent	Feedback that they don't know real person
Doors open and close	Feel bad about experience
Doubting self	Feel better about self in current role
Drained from zoom	Feel good
Dress authentically	Feel like doing the job without having it
Dress comfortable for work	Feel ready to do again
Dress or pantsuit	feeling better now
Dress well for work	Feeling bothered
Drew radius for moving	Feeling family can hold you back
Dynamic between board and consultant	Feeling frustrated
Dynamic with husband	Feeling Good at Beginning of Process
Each experience was different	Feeling good with the board

Feeling happier	Felt judgement right out of the car
Feeling hurt	Felt like 360
Feeling less like self	Felt like a punishment that both were working
Feeling like doing the job of the superintendent	Felt like becoming a bad person
Feeling like husband and self living apart made a difference	Felt like the board was questioning her abilities
Feeling like it isn't for her	Felt like did great
Feeling like overstating experience	Felt like I might get it
Feeling like she knew the answers	Felt like interview was better
Feeling mindset that men make better superintendents	Felt like making an excuse for not getting job
Feeling miserable	Felt like not what they wanted
Feeling not good at the job	Felt like they were asking if she could handle the job
Feeling not ready	Felt like was putting on performance in interviews
Feeling not the right fit	Felt mad at self for being emotional
Feeling okay with it	Felt men would be assertive about contract
Feeling paranoid about being a woman	Felt needed to be like male superintendent
Feeling prepared	Felt personal questions were bad
Feeling slow	Felt relaxed
Feeling something else at play	Felt they made wrong choice
Feeling this way for a long time	Felt too confident
Feeling used by consultants	Felt weird husband needs to come or join church
Feeling very sick	Female board member shows judgement on face
Feeling wasn't a genuine process	Female board members question her coming alone
Feeling yucky about self	Female board members question her coming along
Feels it was antiquated process	Female boss
Feels presents better in person	Female superintendent left husband
Feels there could be regional	Female superintendent wanted a male
Feels when women stay home w/sick kids interferes with job	Fighting stereotypes
Felt assured in work	Figured out things about the interview process
Felt bad about salary questions	Fill up with confidence
Felt behind the eight ball	Final round is just two
Felt better the person was from the division	finalist in 5 districts
Felt can't win either way	Finalist in another district
Felt confident in ability to do job	Finance questions
Felt conflicted about the process	Find the right fit
Felt freeing to stop	First interview community
Felt good about questions	First interview formal
Felt good about reactions	First interview good
Felt good after interview	First interview goof up
Felt good connection w/board	First interview relaxed
Felt guilty about being assertive	First reaction to rejection
Felt had the job	First time applied
Felt humiliated	First time asked question about salary
Felt if I were a man....	First time didn't get job it was a learning opportunity

First time not getting job	God's plan
Fit have my back	Goes to church in community where she lost
Fit is unquantifiable	Going down a path
Fit is where heart is	Going in to last few interviews feeling it would be hard
Fit means connection with people	Going to be me
Fit vision	Going to beat the challenge
Flipped to not good fit	Gonna be ups and downs
Focus group	Gonna hire men
Focus less on stuff or technical	Good experience
Focus on answer	Good sign recruiter called
Format	Goofed budget question
Former superintendent female	Gossip about chances
Former superintendent stepped in	Gossip about other candidates
Found other women had the same experience of losing job	Gotta "not thank you" when applying for principal
Found out other candidate got the job	Got confident after finally getting job
Friend feedback was didn't grab ahold of interview	Got every job applied for before superintendent
Friend was right	Got feedback she asked for too much money
Friends	Got hot
Friends not awkward	Got positive feedback
Friends say women need to be perky	Got second no
Friends who made it to final round, lost too	Got sense would get it
Frustrated he can demand money and get it	Got sick b/c interviewing
Full self in interview	Grateful to get first interview
Game face	Great experience
Gave politically correct answers	Grieve the loss of opportunity
Gender bias	Gut feeling
Gender or assertiveness	Had offer for deputy superintendent
General floating theories	Had three new superintendents at district
Get no, cold response	Had to play get to know me fast
Gets another interview	Happens for reason
Gets worried about what look like	Hard to compete without experience
Getting response from the panel	Hard to get interview
Getting to a higher level might not be worth it	Hard to get job as a woman
Getting validation from interview committee	Hard to not get job
Gift of failure	hard to stomach
Give focus areas	harder for women
Gives all despite board body language	Hate that it was negative experience
Glass ceiling	Have a cry
Go for it	Have a lot to learn
Go teach at university	Have to be someone else
Go with it	Having interview notebooks
God in charge	Having notes at ease
God's hands	Having to get over self

Having to present at interview	I have made tough decisions
Having to work through bitter feelings	I keep the peace IV
He was a man	I know women answers
He was in my head	I say I want to do it
Heartbreaking	I wasn't ready to retire
Help to share community focus	I'm a strong candidate
Hesitates to apply	I'm done
High opinion of skills	I'm here for kids
Highly competitive position	I'm levelheaded
Hindsight is 2020	I'm prepared to be superintendent
Hired internally	Icky
Hired other candidate w/o community support	If I were the dad
Hit to ego	Immune to my charms IV
Hours preparing	Impact of board decisions
How do I be authentic	Importance of state organization
How do men get these positions?	Important for people to want you
How much is feelings?	Important to be transparent
HRC Book	Important to connect w/board
Husband has career	In person interview
Husband supports	Inside head
Husband did well	Insulting to me
Husband died	Integrate BLM
Husband expected to work	Intel from interim superintendent
Husband from community	Intel from someone
Husband gets cancer	Intense process
Husband interviewed	Interesting dealing with search consultants
Husband might not have been happy	Internalized feedback from prior interviews
Husband on school board after loss	Interview after interview
Husband outgoing	Interview format relaxed
Husband supports	Interview format similar
Husband was disappointed	Interview in auditorium
Husband won't come right away	Interview question caught off guard
I am not good	Interview was stellar
I am who I am	Interview wasn't the best
I can lead with poise	Interviewed and got to final round
I can make hard decisions	Interviewed for six, got final for 2
I can't do it again	Interviewed last
I did it	Interviewing close to home
I did my best	Interviewing during pandemic
I didn't read them correctly	Interviewing for final in two districts back-to-back
I don't smile a lot	Interviewing for interim superintendent
I had more competence	Interviewing in the past
I had more experience	Interviewing while still principal

Interviews structured same way	Left daughter and felt rotten
Intimate experience	Left husband and daughter to go to interview
Is coming without husband going to be a problem?	Let down team
Is community a good place for moving family	Let go
Is this worth it?	Liberal board
It was a gender thing	Life of hard knocks IV
It was about how she looked	Little uncomfortable
It was probably for the best	Live in community
It's okay to think it is your path, and it is not	Local paper reported I should get it when I didn't
It's a game	Long shot
It's been hard	Longevity in career
Job was offered 2 times to a male	Look for silver lining
Journaling about the experience	Looked for new job after a year
Joy in current role	Looking back on the process
Judged	looking for a good fit for husband and self
Just a job	Looking for district with diversity
Just blew it	Lose graciously
Just going to be me	Loses confidence
Just tell me I'm not it	Losing myself
Just trust me I will do a good job	Losing three times in a row
Kept improving	Loss is a wound to ego
Kept ship afloat	Loss was let down
Kicked self for wavering	Lost assistant sup job to man
Kicked self for being assertive	Lost b/c family
Kid a senior in high school	Lost to a man
Kids were in college	Lost to former superintendent
Knew about other candidates	Lost to woman
Knew I lost	Lots of confidence
Knew man got it	Lots of open positions
Knew members of search firm	Love data
Know that there are gender issues	Love my community
Knows who up against	Love people
Large district different process	Love the community
Later interviews wanted to be assertive	Love what I do
Laughs about not wearing special clothes	Loved district
Learn and carry on	Loved the community tour
Learn from the experience	Loves working with teachers and kids
Learned a lot	Lucky search consultants sponsored her
Learned how to work with board	Mad at male coworker for getting the job so easily
Learned needed stronger answer	Mad they paid previous sup more money
Learning experience	Made connection
Learning quickly to not share moving alone	Made me humble
Leery of board IV	Made one pager

Major turnover in district	Men don't work as hard as women
Make decisions with all information	Men sit women make it happen
Make sure bring true self	Mentor helps
Makes me so angry	Mentor kept me going
Making self a failure	Mentors
Male board members stiffened up	Middle age crisis
Male board members where surprised	Mind plays games
Male candidate didn't waiver	Mindset that men make better superintendents
Male candidate got his salary thru negotiation	Mini vacation
Male candidate was assertive	Mom was hard worker
Male coworker got the job easily	Moms stay home
Male coworker made remark about being a woman	More about telling story than about self
Male coworker questions work put into interviews	More about not being a failure
Male coworker said got job because of gender	More focused sharing expertise in interviews
Male coworker thought of male/female things	More frank in interview thought the job wasn't hers
Male coworker upset about not getting interview	More relaxed third time interviewing
Male employee interviewing for superintendent	Most jobs go to men
Male female kind of thing	Most like self in first interview
Male perfect person for job	Most positions go to former superintendents
Male superintendent gets job on first try	Motto that failure is opportunity
Male superintendent got more money	Move for husband
Male superintendent is charismatic	Moving away from husband would have been devastation
Male superintendent pointer doesn't share personal	Multiple interviews
Male superintendent with stay-at-home wife	Multiple interviews help feel comfortable
Male would negotiate higher salary	Must experience firsthand
Man gets the job	Mutual conversation
Many vacancies	My answers were really good
Math teacher	My answers yucky
Maybe a lot of competition	My experience didn't matter
Maybe answers showed frustration	My own hang-up
Maybe I am not supposed to be a superintendent	My story
Maybe it's just me?	Navigate that
Maybe not ready	Need balance for my son
Maybe they don't want me	Need to be who I am
Maybe works out for best	Need to finish state retirement
Meditate for sanity	Need to show competence in finance
Meeting with whole board	Needed more expensive clothes and hair
Men apply, women keep working	Needing to add detail to responses in interviews
Men are better at politics	Needing to feel content
Men are better with politics	Needing to preserve current home
Men confident apply	Needy district
Men don't struggle with looking professional	Negative self-talk
Men don't think about their clothes	Negotiated own contract

Negotiated salary	Not feeling experienced
Negotiated extra vac days	Not feeling prepared because sick
Nerve wracking	Not feeling well
Networked with aspiring superintendents	Not getting job was personal
Networking with recruiters	Not getting job is like death
Never do it again	Not going to be that person
Never felt it in first interview	Not good enough to be superintendent
Never going to happen	Not good fit for board
Never intended to hire her	Not in good place
Never know who up against	Not liking who she was becoming
Never negotiated a contract	Not meant to do job
Never wanted to believe stereotypes	Not nervous
Never wavering on answers	Not overly confident
New superintendent in the district	Not political person
New superintendent transitioned badly	Not put self in situation
No board feedback	Not really caring what they thought
No BS got me my job	Not right job for me
No connection with board	Not sharing personal didn't change the offer
No female superintendents	Not skirting around tough concepts
No longer growing	Not smiling
No questions on teaching and learning	Not stressed about the final
No, the end of the world	Not sure it was a fit
No warm fuzzy feelings	Not the one
No weird looks	Not token in current job
No work life balance	Not wanting to be emotional female
Nobody spoke up	Notes for interview
Nod and smile from interview committee	Nothing special in the contract
Nontraditional candidate	Now in superintendency 5 years
Nonverbal feedback was good	Oh my god it went well
Not a cheerleader	Okay not being the choice
Not a fit	Okay with not getting job
Not a good fit if values don't align	One job was lost to a female from that district
Not a good networker	One more call back
Not a peppy person	One on one conversation
Not about getting the job	Only one to get interview in home district
Not about investing life in district	Only thing the man had was his appendage
Not always a rubber stamp	Opposite candidates' backgrounds
Not at top of game	Option for interview
Not bitter	Other candidate was over charter schools
Not confident in ability to run large district	Other candidate watched interview video
Not conscious thing	Other district not good fit
Not disillusioned	Other district wanted a man
Not end of world	Other job wouldn't have been good fit



Other opportunities  
 Other things at play  
 Outgoing superintendent pulls strings  
 Outside district  
 Owns whole rack of interview clothes  
 Parents raised me  
 Partial fit  
 Particular about job location  
 Particular about location for interview  
 Pay disparity  
 People answer without substance  
 People are silly  
 People mean and cruel in boardrooms  
 People uncivilized in board rooms  
 Perceptions of reality  
 Person who got it didn't have experience  
 Personality  
 Personality or gender  
 Personalized presentation  
 Philosophy of being me  
 Physical discomfort  
 Physically being at interviews  
 Pissed  
 Pivoted language  
 Playing games  
 Political process  
 Positive interaction with district  
 Positive self-talk  
 Practice interviews  
 Practicing daily  
 Practicing with men  
 Pray  
 Predominately male  
 Predominately male  
 Preparation different for each district  
 Presentation at state conference  
 Presentation one pager  
 Presented data  
 Pretty clueless the first few times  
 Previous boss didn't manage board well  
 Principal horrible job  
 Probably not good at politics  
 Probably not see real me

Probably wouldn't volunteer to talk about it  
 Process like no other before  
 Process not equitable  
 Process not like other interviews  
 Process was a show of politics  
 Process was good  
 Professional rejection  
 Proud to get interview  
 Prove self  
 Provided concrete examples  
 Public process  
 Pull back around  
 Pulling it together to interview  
 Pursue other districts  
 Pushes on in interview  
 Put 36 years into the job  
 Put in perspective  
 Put me in a bad place  
 Put pressure on self  
 Put so much into it  
 Question self  
 Question self-worth  
 Questioning how male coworker got a superintendent job  
 Questioning why she left daughter  
 Questions don't matter as much as educational  
 Questions her motive  
 Questions how to change everything about self to look like  
 Questions if it is because of gender  
 Questions if she didn't look professional  
 Questions self  
 racial issue  
 Really hard  
 Really upsetting  
 Really work in second interview  
 Record answers for video interview  
 Recorded ideas in a book  
 Recruiter called for job and it felt right  
 Recruiter said don't bring artifacts  
 Reflect by exercise  
 Reflected on the process  
 Reflecting  
 Reflecting on Process  
 Reframe thinking

Refused to feel bad about not getting job	School Board Questions
Relationship with Husband	School board questions about particular law
Relationships are key	School board questions what she will do
Relief to not be superintendent	School board really listened
Relieved it was over	School board relationship
Relieved to not get job	School board shocked she declined
Religious community	School board wanted to interview
Remain composed	School board wants her to be in community
Research board	School board was going to do it
Research district	School board was personable
Research to negotiate salary	School board went with experienced candidate
Retired superintendents applied for jobs	School board will pick best connection
Retirement Issues	School boards care about fit
Rigged	School boards don't care about expertise
Roll out however it rolls	School boards look for experience
Sad	School boards who don't use search firms already have a ca
Scared to call board chair to cancel	Search consultant dynamics
School board asked good questions	Search consultants play role in process
School board asks how she'll work w/county officials	Search consultant shared that she was in the top 2
School board asks how she will work with community	Search consultants bring viable candidates to board
School board asks if she can make hard decisions	Search consultants court you
School board asks if she will join a church	Search consultants don't coach you
School board body language	Search consultants' job to bring in people
School board concerned she won't be in community	Search consultants just bring you to the interview
School board deliberated long time	Search consultants' old white men
School board doesn't tell you the truth	Search consultants paid high amount
School board dynamics	Search consultants paid to find good candidates
School board feedback not happy person	search consultants work for board
School board forced questions	Search firm gave positive feedback
School board had many superintendents	Searched for jobs in a radius
School board handled it terrible	second guess
School board imply not okay for woman to be alone	Second interview asks what you want in contract
School board interviewed husband	Second interview break bread
School board leaned in	Second interview closed up
School board looking for internal candidate	Second interview conversation
School board looks for experience	Second interview formal
School board made feel comfortable	Second interview get to know
School board member freaked	Second interview good
School board member thinks wordy	Second interview makes nervous
School board might not like her	Second interview means they like me
School board operations don't know internal ops	Second interview more personal
School board president was helpful	Second interview more pressure
School board priority	Second interview no good

Second interview was awkward	Something personal
Second round questions about goals	Something physical going on
See women getting superintendent jobs other places	Sometimes didn't happen
Selective about friends	Soul searching valley IV
self	Spend time in the community
Self-conscious of how look	Spirituality
Self got knocked down	Spoke from experience
Self on display	Stalked board
Sells experience to consultant	Stand up for BLM
Sense that right people land in right spot	Standard questions
Sensemaking	Stands for cultural relevance in interview
Share experience	Started snowballing
Shared information about the community in interview	State goal to increase women sups
Shared positive and negative about district	States salary expectations
Shared technical expertise in interview	Stay close to home
Shared what wanted in contract	Stay in state
Shares core beliefs about DEI	Stayed helped transition for male sup
Shares values with board	Stayed on in role despite loss
shifting away from self	Still racial issues
Shifting moment	Still think about it
Shocked to get second interview	Stop interviewing
Shocking	Stop interviewing
Should be about educational philosophy	Straight shooter
Should be about learning and students	Strategic planning
Should be me	Stress of pandemic
Should care more	Stressful
Should have been called back	Strong for family
Should women wear a dress?	Stronger after process
Show experience	Struggled with interview
Shows she can make a decision	Struggling with doing the job of the superintendent
Shut down in interview	Struggling with impression
Similar job	Study strategic plan
Similar questions in interviews	Successful career
Size of district	Super awesome
Small district	Super encouraging to be in the top
Small town politics	Super intentional with interview
Smile through it	Superintendency is like a marriage
So raw	Superintendency is political
Social capital	Superintendent interview toughest
Social justice values	Superintendent is a crazy job
Social person	Superintendent who got job is doing good
Some positions paid less than current	Support
Somebody told me I'm not peppy	Supporting husband's choice

Supports family  
 Supposed to be business focused  
 Surprised and disgusted  
 Surprised to get interview  
 Sympathy from husband  
 System  
 Take away from experience  
 Take in stride IV  
 Take step back  
 Takes a while to get over it  
 Talk about self in interview  
 Talked self out of wanting to be superintendent  
 Talking might be therapy  
 Talking to male superintendent  
 Teachers at interview  
 Technical expertise in interviewing  
 Tell self to stop researching  
 Tell stories in interviews  
 Tells board she will stay in current job  
 Tempered core beliefs in interview  
 Terrible  
 Tested for COVID  
 Thankful for mentors  
 That is a woman's response  
 There's another job out there  
 They knew I wasn't right for the job  
 They must not like me  
 They were pulling at me  
 Think I turned them off  
 Think it might be an excuse  
 Think maybe could work  
 Thinking about all the preparation  
 Thinking about answers to interview questions  
 Thinking about how she presented  
 Thinking about what it would look like to take notes  
 Thinking back about what you say in interviews  
 Thinking be myself  
 Thinking it won't go well  
 Thinking left daughter to interview  
 Thinking need something different  
 Thinking needs to be assertive  
 Thinking too much like self  
 Thinks if didn't do well in outfit, not to wear it  
 Thinks it's harder to be a woman in leadership  
 Thinks men are better at convincing  
 Thinks people go in to get the job  
 Thinks personal issue  
 Thinks that being a good b-sser  
 Third interview feeling like failure  
 This district needed relationship maker  
 This isn't doing me any good  
 This part is done for me  
 Thought about sharing expertise  
 Thought I can do this  
 Thought job was earmarked for someone  
 Thought search consultant would give advice  
 Thought she can't do this  
 Thought the board had already decided on someone else  
 Thought this is how it goes  
 Three cabinet members followed me  
 Three years until retirement  
 Throw name in hat  
 Thrown under bus  
 Timid  
 Token candidate  
 Told husband don't know what to do  
 Told husband it was the one  
 Told not going to next round  
 Told to be peppy  
 Told to do a presentation  
 Told to smile more  
 Told was strongest candidate  
 Toll of being rejected  
 Too assertive  
 Too forceful  
 Too much doing it over and over  
 Too much research/district attached  
 Took a risk with presentation  
 Took a while to get over it  
 Tough board meeting when didn't get the job  
 Tough question from board  
 Tour gives insights into fit  
 Tour went well  
 Tow company line  
 Trotted as token  
 Trouble arises during interview

Trust the process	Watched other candidates
Try again	Watching for the board agenda
Try not to read into things	We fail forward
Try to give answers board wanted	Wear lipstick and smile
Trying to move up	Wear suit
Turned in good resume	Wear suits when needed
Unbalance of female/male	Week to get over it
Uncomfortable being assertive and wishy washy	Went into interviews not thinking about being a woman
Uncomfortable in community	What am I supposed to learn from this?
Understand the experience	What do men have that I don't
Uneasy feeling	What do they think of me
Unfair advantage	What do they want to hear
Unmooring	What does it mean for the district to lose me
Up against man with questionable record	What is keeping from moving forward?
Upsetting	What is wrong with me
Used as a pawn	What men always say
Varied experience	What now?
Vent to husband	What would it look like
Very conscious	Where do I go now?
Very serious person	Where do we go next?
Visceral pain from experience	Who wants this job?
Wait for kids to graduate	Why am I not getting hired?
Waited to apply	Why did I do that? IV
Walk away if not good fit	Why did the board make this choice?
Want job b/c innovative	Willing to come with children
Want the job	Willing to do hard things
Want to back out	Willing to move to any place that she got job
Want to be part of community	Women are more honest
Want to raise children in district	Women can run instruction
Want to work in high poverty district	Women can't be political
Wanted to seem assertive	Women have it harder
Wanting job for community's sake	Women lay it on the line
Wanting to do well	Women make good elementary principals
Wants people to see her as true to word	women make good teachers
Wants to be able to follow through	Women make good worker bees
Wants to be close to home	Women sacrifice family
Wants to be genuine	Women stay home
Wants to show competency	Women were like those in her community
Was interim superintendent	Women won't get the job
Was perfect candidate for them	Won't hire me either
Wasn't being true	Won't interview again
Wasn't meant to be	Wonders why board asks questions/don't want answers
Waste of time	Work ethic

Work in current job is important  
Work life balance came  
Work through process  
Worked for the same superintendent for 10 years  
Worked in district for years  
Worried about calling to cancel interview  
Worried about how she presented  
Worried about self hard to answer  
Worried about showing competence  
Worried about social media  
Worried what the board would think  
Worse than I thought  
Would have done well in community interview  
Would probably be crying  
Would they like me?  
Wouldn't change  
Writing down questions after interview  
Wrong with me?  
You don't know the answer  
You know when you don't get the job  
You think you have skills  
You're not good enough  
Your mind gets in the way  
Zoom  
Zoom interview distracting look at self  
Zoom interview lighting makes look bac  
Zoom interview not personal  
Zoom interview worried about background  
2 positions search consultant was used  
21st century  
26 years in ed  
3 candidates in final round  
3 Strikes  
34 years in education