Gender Inequity in the Representation of Women as Superintendents in Mississippi Public Schools: The "No Problem Problem"

Deidre Joy Seale Smith

The University of Southern Mississippi

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GENDER INEQUITY IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AS SUPERINTENDENTS IN MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
THE “NO PROBLEM PROBLEM”

by

Deidre Joy Seale Smith

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2015
ABSTRACT

GENDER INEQUITY IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AS SUPERINTENDENTS IN MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
THE “NO PROBLEM PROBLEM”
by Deidre Joy Seale Smith

December 2015

This qualitative study investigated the phenomenon of continuing underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi K-12 public schools. The study was conducted during the 2014-2015 school year. At the time of the study, women represented 23% of the overall population of superintendents in Mississippi public schools. Fourteen women who were serving as superintendents in Mississippi during the 2014-2015 school year participated. Interviews were conducted, and the qualitative data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The data were analyzed using constructs associated with feminist theory, feminist poststructuralist and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks. Two primary themes emerged as a result of this research study. First, gender discrimination represented the primary factor impacting every area of the female superintendents’ lives – both professionally and personally; and second, the women often denied the existence of or failed to recognize any existence of challenges associated with gender. The findings resulted in specific implications that guided the development of recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. Recommendations for policy and practice included initiating dialogue associated with gender bias between women and men, specifically in the field of education, and the inclusion of gender consciousness as required components in undergraduate education.
and graduate educational leadership programs. Finally, a number of recommendations for future research were provided, including replicating the current study utilizing a case study methodology, exploring the intersection of gender and race relative to the superintendency, and analyzing current education and educational leadership graduate and undergraduate degree programs of study in colleges throughout Mississippi for inclusion (or exclusion) of gender consciousness.
GENDER INEQUITY IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AS SUPERINTENDENTS IN MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE “NO PROBLEM PROBLEM”

by

Deidre Joy Seale Smith

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School of The University of Southern Mississippi in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2015
DEDICATION

Over the past 18 months, I have traveled the journey of a lifetime. As I near the end of this venture, I dedicate this work to those who have walked alongside me. First, I dedicate this work to my mother who instilled in me a passion for learning, the drive to succeed, and an understanding of the difference between “I can” and “I will.” For without these bone-deep beliefs, I would never have even started on this journey.

I also dedicate this work to my children, Zach, Kalee, Zane, and Clint. Guys, you cheered for me, tolerated my absence from your lives over the past couple of years, and ultimately, supported my desire to complete a goal I set for myself many years ago.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the love of my life and the one person who knows me best, my husband, Todd. When it comes to leaning in, you truly represent the gold standard. Throughout our 34 years of marriage, no matter what I was striving to succeed, you were always my biggest cheerleader. This includes my efforts to advance professionally and my deep desire to complete my doctoral studies. For the past 18 months, you literally stepped in and took charge of everything at home – the cooking, cleaning, and yes, even the laundry. Each time I doubted whether I would finish, you were there to help move me forward, one step at a time. The completion of this journey belongs to both of us, and it would mean nothing without you by my side. I also know, without a doubt, that my success means as much or more to you as it does to me. From the very beginning of our journey together, you not only allowed me to be unlike most girls, but you celebrated it. Your acceptance, celebration, and respect of my being different exemplify the very essence of this study. Thank you for traveling right beside me throughout this journey. I can’t wait to see what lies ahead for us.

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As an individual and educator with a passion for learning, completing my doctorate has been a life-long goal for me, both personally and professionally. Things happen, and due to a number of changes in my own life, I almost let go of this dream. When I decided to return to complete this journey, Dr. Thelma Roberson encouraged me and provided guidance, revising my plan of study and most importantly, helping me believe in myself. Without her assistance, I would not have been readmitted to the doctoral program; therefore, I am deeply grateful that she gave me another chance. Dr. Roberson continued this support by serving on my dissertation committee, following my progress and cheering for me, right until the very end of this journey. In addition to Dr. Roberson, I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Tom O’Brien and Dr. Ann E. Blankenship, members of my dissertation committee, for providing feedback, leading me to reflect on and improve the content and quality of delivery in my writing.

Socrates stated, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” As an educator, this has always been one of my favorite quotes. However, Dr. Leslie Locke, my dissertation chair, led me to a much deeper understanding of this quote. During the first semester I returned to graduate school, I enrolled in Dr. Locke’s qualitative class, my first introduction to qualitative research. Her style of teaching included asking numerous questions, often answering students’ questions with yet another question. It is this same approach that she used in mentoring and guiding me throughout the dissertation process. Throughout our work together, Dr. Locke challenged, questioned, and encouraged me. She kindled my interests, provided guidance, yet
expected me to seek my own answers. For all the time she invested in me, I am deeply grateful.

Finally, I would be remiss without expressing my appreciation to the amazing women who participated in this research study. In sharing their experiences as female superintendents in Mississippi, they allowed me to experience a brief glimpse of their world, the challenges they continue to encounter, and instilled in me a sense of hope for increased opportunities for women aspiring to the superintendency.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Overview

In the space of just two generations, gender roles and expectations have been fundamentally transformed. The vast majority of Americans believe that women and men are entitled to equal opportunities. The challenge now is to recognize our distance from this goal, and to build a movement capable of reaching it. No just society can afford the irregularities that women still face in status, power, income, and physical security. In 1908, William Allen White advised women in America to “raise more hell and fewer dahlias.” That remains good advice. (Rhode, 2014, p. 159)

The women’s movements of the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s brought about significant progress in terms of gender equity for women in the United States (Friedan, 1997; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Kathryn Kolbert, Director of the Athena Center for Leadership Studies at Barnard University stated, “Great progress was made in the 70s, life has changed significantly, but progress for women has plateaued in rights, in leadership, and in the ability to contribute equally in social and cultural affairs” (as cited in Rhode, 2014, p. 17). Compared to the advances in gender equity of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, little progress occurred during the 1990s (Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Terry O’Neill, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) addressed the lack of continued growth in gender equity in the 1990s and emphasized, “We are totally stalled out, and we are getting pushback” (as cited in Rhode, 2014, p. 17). Sandberg (2013) echoed Kolbert’s and O’Neill’s comments, reporting an overall decline in women’s
movement into leadership positions, and emphasizing the significant obstacles faced by those women who did move into top leadership roles. The stalling of the gender revolution in the United States represents a stark reminder that William Allen White’s advice to women, as far back as 1908, remains timely even in the 21st century.

Of even greater concern than the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and the obstacles they may encounter, is women’s “lack of consensus that there still is a serious problem, or that they have any capacity or responsibility to address it” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 6). Rhode (2014) referred to women’s apathy toward the stalling of the women’s movement as the “no problem problem” (p. 6) and emphasized that it is critical for American women to acknowledge this “no problem problem” – “the belief that barriers have come down, women have moved up, and that equal opportunity has been secured” (p. 19). Acknowledging the reality of equal obstacles for women, Rhode (2014) further stated, “Despite four decades of enforcement of equal employment legislation, women’s employment status remains far from equal” (p. 7).

Women’s efforts to access leadership opportunities in many fields of employment continue to represent a barrier (Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013), including leadership roles within the public education systems throughout the United States. Specifically, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in the superintendency, with women representing approximately 23% of the national superintendent population, “slightly more than a three to one ratio favoring males over females” (American Association of School Administrators, 2013, p. 10). Also, at the state level, women represented only 23% of Mississippi’s overall superintendent population for the 2014-2015 school year (Mississippi Department of Education [MDE], 2014a). Considering that a significantly
higher percentage of women, compared to men, currently serve in various capacities throughout public schools across the United States, the continuing underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles, specifically the superintendency (AASA, 2013; MDE, 2014a), illustrates women’s ongoing challenges, even in the 21st century.

Leadership Defined

According to Northouse (2007), “Leadership is a highly sought-after and highly valued commodity” (p. 1). A simple Google search of online sales’ giant, Amazon.com (2014), resulted in over 154,000 book titles related to leadership. Multiple scholars and researchers (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004; Bass, 1990; Gardner, 1990; Hickman, 1998; Mumford, 2006; Rost, 1991) made attempts at conceptualizing and/or defining leadership (Northouse, 2007). To emphasize this point, Stogdill (1974) stated, “There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it” (as cited in Northouse, 2007, p. 2). Using multiple definitions of leadership (Antonakis et al., 2004; Bass, 1990; Gardner, 1990; Hickman, 1998; Mumford, 2006; Rost, 1991), Northouse (2007) synthesized the components central to the phenomenon of leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3).

Other researchers provided a multitude of viewpoints related to leadership. In contrast to viewing leadership as a process, Jago (1982) reported that the trait perspective suggested certain individuals are essentially born with a natural propensity for leadership, along with specific traits enabling them to lead successfully. According to Sousa (2003), specific traits or common behaviors characterize excellent leadership. For example:
Great leaders are made, not born, know their stuff, have a clear vision of their mission, respect and care for their followers, have high expectations, demonstrate absolute integrity, and are excellent role models. (p. 8)

Northouse (2007) contrasted assigned leadership versus emergent leadership stating that assigned leaders include those individuals who become leaders simply because of an assigned or “formal position” (p. 5). In contrast, emergent leadership occurs when an individual naturally emerges as a leader due to being considered “the most influential member of a group or organization” (Northouse, 2007, p. 5). In essence, assigned leadership is determined by an individual’s position, while emergent leadership evolves naturally as individuals work collaboratively toward a common goal (Northouse, 2007).

Multiple researchers also categorized leadership based upon specific leadership approaches. The situational approach, for example, stresses that effective leaders adapt their style based upon any given situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). Similar to the situational approach, the contingency theory advocates aligning a leader’s style to the right setting in order to ensure effective leadership. In other words, the leader’s actions and decisions are generally contingent upon a given situation (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987).

Sociologist James MacGregor Burns (2003) defined two types of leadership – transactional and transformational. Burns stated transactional leadership essentially includes most leadership models previously defined. In this type of leadership model, however, the focus is upon the interactions between the leader and followers. Transformational leadership, in contrast, occurs when the leader engages the followers, resulting in an increase in both the leaders’ and the followers’ levels of buy-in, morality,
and passion for their work (Burns, 2003). Transformational leaders strive to help the followers reach their greatest potential, but in doing so, they, as leaders are also transformed (Burns, 2003; Northouse, 2007). In summary, leadership has been defined as both process and trait oriented, classified as assigned or emergent, and conceptualized using various leadership theories. Without question, efforts to define or conceptualize leadership have been complicated and problematic.

Gender and Leadership in the United States

Research related to the leadership phenomenon was prevalent for a number of years, but the topic of gender and leadership was largely ignored until the 1970s (Hoyt, 2007). According to Hoyt (2007), the void in the literature could be attributed to “methodological hindrances, a predominance of male researchers largely uninterested in the topic, and an academic assumption of gender equality in leadership” (p. 265). In 1970, when the topic of gender and leadership barely existed in the literature, 58% of college students were men (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013). However, by the early 1980s, “the gender gap in college enrollment favored women,” and women represented at least 50% of the college graduates in the United States (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013, p. 1). This trend continued, and “by 2003, there were 1.35 females for every male who graduated from a four-year college and 1.30 females for every male undergraduate” (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006, p. 134). A report presented by the United States Census Bureau (2012), the National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, stated that women received 59% of all college degrees earned in 2009. Further, women outnumbered men in the numbers of Associate’s, Bachelor’s, and Master’s degrees, and also increased from 14% of the students receiving doctoral
degrees in 1971 to nearly half of the doctoral degrees awarded in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). According to Sandberg (2013), women exceeded men in terms of educational attainment, and women also have begun moving into fields previously dominated by men.

England (2010) referred to these increased opportunities for women as a gender revolution. Overall, women gained greater access to advanced and professional degrees, secured access to birth control, and secured legal protection against gender discrimination in education and employment opportunities. England (2010) emphasized, “As sweeping as these changes have been, change in the gender system has been uneven – affecting some groups more than others and some arenas of life more than others, and change has recently stalled” (p. 150). In general, both men and women disregarded women’s continued demands for equity in employment and wages because they believed previous barriers women encountered were resolved (Young, 2005).

In spite of more women moving into leadership roles and greater emphasis being placed on gender equity in scholarly research, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg (2013) declared, “The truth is men still run the world. Of the 195 independent countries in the world, only 17 are led by women” (p. 5). Further, “Despite these gains, the percentage of women at the top of corporate America has barely budged over the past decade” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 5). It is also rare for women to occupy the most powerful offices in government or in corporate positions in the United States (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013). As late as 2013, only 21% of the Fortune 500 CEOs were women. Women held 14% of executive officer positions, 17% of board seats, and constituted 18% of our elected congressional officials (Sandberg, 2013).
The stalling of the gender revolution (England, 2010) continued to be apparent in that even though women clearly surpassed men in educational attainment (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013; Sandberg, 2013), they still lagged behind in occupying top leadership roles in government, the corporate world, and within the field of education throughout United States. According to Sandberg (2013), “This means that when it comes to making decisions that most affect our world, women’s voices are not heard equally” (p. 6).

In addition to being underrepresented in leadership positions, women often faced inequities in wages, also referred to as the “gender pay gap” (American Association of University Women, 2014, p. 2). In 2013, the median annual earnings for women were $39,157, compared to men’s median annual earnings of $50,033, reflecting a 22 percent annual pay gap (AAUW, 2014). In addition, females were much more likely to live in poverty than men (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2006). Since 1995, the poverty rate for women increased in fifteen states in our country, and in another 15 states, it decreased less than one percentage point (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2006). Women who worked full-time and year-round in the United States still earned only 78 percent of what men earned, an increase over previous reports (AAUW, 2014).

Another analysis conducted by the AAUW (2014) found that one year after graduating from college, women were paid 82% of what their male colleagues were paid. A previous study by this same organization reported the pay gap widened between women and men following graduation from college (AAUW, 2012). Ten years after these men and women graduated from college, women were paid 69% of what men were paid (AAUW, 2012, 2014). The largest difference in the gender pay gap, with regard to educational attainment, occurred for women receiving a doctoral degree. In 2011, women
earning a doctoral degree earned an average of 79% of what men earned with the same level of education (AAUW, 2014).

Women typically were paid less than men for the same job, even in positions of leadership and professional occupations (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2006). By law, employers are required to pay women and men equally. As far back as 1963, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act requiring employers to provide “equal pay for equal work” (AAUW, 2014, p. 20). In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, barring any discrimination in “hiring, firing, promotion, and wages on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” (HR 7152, Stat. 703). President Barack Obama’s first piece of legislation, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Act Pay of 2009, provided additional protection against discrimination for employees regarding pay. Attempts to ensure equal pay protection have continued to be introduced in national legislative sessions (AAUW, 2014).

Table 1 reports the percent of women’s median earnings compared to men’s median earnings in various professional occupations, as reported by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). Based upon this information, earnings for professional women who worked in the nursing field experienced the least gap in wages compared to those of men. Also, the most significant disparity in wages occurred for women accountants earning only 70% of wages earned by male colleagues.
Table 1

*Gender Pay Gap in Median Earnings for Workers in Leadership Roles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Women’s Earnings as a Percentage of Men’s Earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountants</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians and surgeons</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Administrators</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO-Management/Business</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources Managers</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer programmers</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacists</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Economist Evelyn Murphy (2012) estimated that over a lifetime of work (47 years of full-time work), the gender wage gap totaled up to approximately $700,000 for a high school graduate, $1.2 million for a college graduate, and up to $2 million for an individual earning a professional degree. According to the AAUW (2014), “After controlling for hours worked, occupation, college major, employment sector, and other factors associated with pay, the gap shrinks, but approximately one-third of the gap cannot be explained by factors commonly understood to affect earnings” (p. 8).
The authors of the AAUW (2014) study hypothesized that the gender pay gap may be related to the response of both men and women to parenting responsibilities, and that a higher probability of women than men transitioned either to part-time employment or completely exited the workforce in order to care for their children (AAUW, 2014). Statistics indicated that ten years after graduating from college, 23 percent of mothers compared, to only one percent of fathers, exited the workforce (AAUW, 2014). Seventeen percent of mothers, compared to only 2 percent of fathers, transitioned to part-time employment (AAUW, 2014). In addition to impacting women’s pay, the differences in women’s and men’s responses to parenting may have also decreased women’s leadership opportunities. When considering the low numbers of women in leadership positions, in general, it is critical to note that women, in most cases, left the workforce due to parenting responsibilities more often than men, possibly impacting the likelihood of gaining leadership opportunities throughout their careers (AAUW, 2014).

Gender and School Leadership in the United States

At the time of this study, gender diversity in the top leadership role in our country’s public schools, the superintendency, mirrored the same trends as those impacting our national government, the military, U.S. corporations, and industry (AASA, 2000; Sandberg, 2013). In 2008, 76% of K-12 public school teachers were female, and 52% of these women held a master’s degree or higher (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). With the large representation of women as teachers, and considering the significant increase in the number of women who obtained advanced professional degrees (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013), one might assume that women would have dominated leadership positions in K-12 education. In fact, “as leadership positions rise in stature and power, the number of
women declines” (Snyder & Dillow, 2012, p. 61). Women held 76% of public school teacher positions, but females held only 44% of the leadership positions in education (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). From 1999 to 2008, the percentage of female public elementary school principals increased from 52 to 59% and from 22 to 29% at public secondary schools (Kowalski). The top public school leadership role, the superintendent, reflected an increase in the percentage of female superintendents from 13.2% in 2008 to 23% in 2013 (AASA, 2013).

At the state level, women represented only 29% of the state level superintendents, also called “Chief State School Officers” (CCSSO, 2012). In spite of the fact that approximately 76% of classroom teachers were female, only 23% of the superintendents in the United States were women (AASA, 2013). Recent studies (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2008; Hanson, 2011; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Ryan, 2012) investigated the national phenomenon of small numbers of women serving as superintendents in our nation’s public schools.

Critical to this phenomenon were two important observations. First, with women represented at significantly greater proportions of the overall population of educators in the United States, (AASA, 2013; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Snyder & Dillow, 2012), it seemed likely that more administrators, including superintendents, would be selected from the large pool of women teachers. Also, data clearly showed the disparity between the percent of men and women completing college and receiving advanced degrees (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013; England, 2010; Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006; Sandberg, 2013). This trend also should have resulted in higher numbers of women than men being selected to serve in
school districts’ top leadership role, the superintendency. In summary, women continued to significantly outnumber men serving in the field of education. Additionally, women far surpassed men in completing advanced degrees in education – yet, a mere 23% of the current superintendents serving in districts throughout the United States were women (AASA, 2013).

With regard to gender equity in superintendents’ salaries, AASA conducted a review of the nation’s superintendents’ base salary scale (AASA, 2013, 2014). According to this analysis, the median base salary of superintendents in the United States increased with district enrollment. Therefore, the base salary for both men and women superintendents increased based on the student enrollment within their school districts. In addition, AASA (2013, 2014) reported that the median base salaries paid to women superintendents were, in fact, slightly higher than male superintendents.

Gender and Leadership in Mississippi

Mississippi mirrored the national trend with low numbers of women in positions of leadership. For example, Mississippi women were underrepresented in leadership roles in both state government and state agencies. Data showed that only 15% of the elected officials in the Mississippi House of Representatives were women (Mississippi Legislature House of Representatives, 2014). The Senate numbers reflected a slightly higher percentage with 18% of the overall Senate being female (Mississippi Legislature Senate, 2014). Women made up less than one-third of various state agency board members. The only board with equal representation of women was that of the Mississippi Department of Corrections (Mississippi Commission on the Status of Women, 2013). Only 18.2% of the members of the State Board of Education were women (Mississippi
Commission on the Status of Women, 2013). However, females held roughly 36% of the top management positions in the Mississippi Department of Education (Mississippi Commission on the Status of Women, 2013). The Mississippi Department of Health had the highest percentage of women leading, with 69% of women in top positions (Mississippi Commission on the Status of Women, 2013).

Mississippi women were also underrepresented in leadership positions within the business community. Approximately 36.3% of employed women in Mississippi served in managerial or professional capacities (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2012). In 2011, there were approximately 65,000 businesses owned by women in the state of Mississippi (U. S. Small Business Administration, 2013), representing 26.9% of all small businesses in Mississippi. This number reflected an increase from the 2002 count of approximately 47,102 small businesses owned by Mississippi women, a representation of approximately 25.1% of all Mississippi small businesses (U. S. Small Business Administration, 2009). A review of the 2009 data report revealed a 22.9% increase in women-owned businesses in Mississippi between 1997 and 2002. Further review of the 2011 data report revealed a mere 1.8% increase in women-owned businesses in Mississippi between 2002 and 2011, indicating a significant decline (or stalling) in the increase in women-owned businesses in Mississippi (U. S. Small Business Administration, 2009, 2013).

Unfortunately, as a whole, Mississippi ranked near the bottom in the number of women in higher education. Compared to other states in 2012, Mississippi ranked 48th in the percentage of women with four or more years of college (IWPR, 2012). This low ranking was due to only 22.1% of women in Mississippi having four or more years of
college, which represented an increase from 20.2% in 2009 (IWPR, 2009) and 16.6% in 2000 (IWPR, 2004). These data indicated that more women in Mississippi were completing four or more years of college or receiving degrees than in previous years. However, a ranking of 48th out of 50 states also revealed that Mississippi women were nowhere near closing the gap of the number of women receiving four or more years of college compared to the rest of the country (IWPR, 2012).

According to the United States Department of Commerce (Hartmann, Sorokina, & Williams, 2006), women in the southeast ranked in the bottom third in terms of median annual earnings. Between 1989 and 2005, Mississippi demonstrated a sizeable increase with an overall 10.1% gain in women’s wages. Even with this sizeable increase in women’s wages, a projection of a similar rate of progress in closing the “gender wage gap will take 50 years for women to achieve pay parity with men” (Hartmann et al., 2006, p. 8). More recent data reflected the median earnings for men in Mississippi equaled to approximately $40,000 compared to women’s median earnings of roughly $31,000 (IWPR, 2012). Overall, in terms of leading state agencies, owning businesses, attaining higher education, and wages, women in Mississippi remained underrepresented and underpaid compared to men in Mississippi.

Gender and School Leadership in Mississippi

While approximately 76% of the classroom teachers across the United States were women (AASA, 2010), the data reflected an even higher percentage of females in the teaching profession in Mississippi. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012), women represented roughly 84% of the classroom teachers in the state of Mississippi. With regard to the leadership of schools in Mississippi, women
principals led approximately 50% of the schools throughout the state (Mississippi Department of Education [MDE], 2014b). For the 2014-2015 school year, female superintendents led 34 of the 146 public school districts in the state of Mississippi (MDE, 2014a). Therefore, Mississippi’s statistics for female representation in the superintendency mirrored the national percentage of 23% (AASA, 2013) with women also representing 23% of the state’s 2014-2015 superintendent population, an increase of three percent from the 2013-2014 school year (MDE, 2014b).

A review of the average salaries of Mississippi superintendents was inconclusive because the data were reported with no allowance for numerous variables such as student enrollment, years of experience, level of education, and so on. In contrast to the national analysis comparing male and female superintendents’ base salaries, Mississippi’s superintendents’ salaries were only reported to the Mississippi School Board Association (2014) for each superintendent’s total contract amount. In order to conduct a valid analysis of Mississippi’s superintendents’ salaries, a more consistent reporting process would be necessary. For example, reporting Mississippi superintendents’ base salaries (determined by student enrollment) would provide a fair and equitable comparison. Also, a statistical analysis taking into account multiple variables (such as each district’s enrollment, individual superintendent’s years of experience, education, and so on) could be used to generate a statistical regression across and within variables to compare superintendents’ salary.

Based upon the salary data provided (MSBA, 2014), a general comparison of Mississippi superintendents’ salaries from the 2013-2014 school year revealed little difference between the mean salary of men and female superintendents. For example, the
average male superintendent’s salary was $106,753 compared to the average female superintendent’s salary of $106,055 (Mississippi School Board Association, 2014). The median salary for male superintendents was $102,500, compared to the median female superintendents’ salary of $105,100. The lowest paid female superintendent in Mississippi received a salary of $19,610, while the lowest paid male superintendent received a salary of $18,634, revealing a difference of $976 (MSBA, 2014). However, the highest salary for male superintendents in Mississippi was $200,000, and the highest salary for female superintendents in Mississippi was $155,280, revealing a difference of $44,720 (MSBA, 2014). A comparison of Mississippi’s superintendents, by gender, showed the salary of the highest paid male superintendent in Mississippi was approximately 23% greater than Mississippi’s highest paid female superintendent (MSBA, 2014).

The disparity in the superintendents’ salaries could be attributed to several different variables. Generally, appointed superintendents received a higher salary than elected. Superintendents representing a city district, rather than a county district, also may have received a higher salary (MSBA, 2014). In addition, other factors impacting superintendents’ pay may have included the district’s student enrollment, superintendents’ level of education, previous experience, and so on.

For the purposes of this study, an overall generalization of the review of the data revealed the most significant discrepancy in Mississippi superintendents’ salaries, by gender, occurred between the highest paid male superintendent and the highest paid female superintendent (MSBA, 2014). Further statistical analyses of differences in
Mississippi superintendents’ salaries, by gender, were recommended for future studies, specifically those studies utilizing quantitative methodology.

**Statement of the Problem**

The representation of women serving as superintendents in Mississippi increased over the past few years; yet, a significant discrepancy remained between the number of female superintendents compared to male superintendents. A few studies previously investigated this phenomenon in Mississippi (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Norwood, 2005; Page-Hite, 2004). Two of these studies used quantitative methods or a mixed methods approach except for Page-Hite (2004) who utilized qualitative case study methodology. Stories in qualitative design, in contrast to numbers in quantitative methods, offer powerful opportunities to personalize information. These stories from the women superintendents themselves, their experiences, challenges, celebrations, and especially their personal stories from their hearts allowed me, as the researcher, to effectively respond to the research questions. The experiences of the female superintendents – both individually and collectively – provided a lens through which their stories were told and heard.

It was critical for female superintendents in Mississippi to share their stories in order for other women to gain equal access to the superintendency in our state. In order for this to occur, we focused on identifying perceived barriers for women aspiring to the position of superintendent, along with strategies to overcome these barriers. Doing so offered guidance in addressing the continuing underrepresentation of female superintendents leading school districts in Mississippi. This research study also focused on understanding perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of the women who
were currently leading school districts in Mississippi. Understanding the impact of these perceived traits, dispositions, and practices of female superintendents provided guidance to both current and future female superintendents in Mississippi.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the phenomenon of the small numbers of women currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi. Part of the study sought to understand the perceived barriers facing women who were currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi.

A secondary purpose of this study was to understand the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women leading school districts in Mississippi. Developing a profile of these perceived characteristics of female superintendents provided direction for other women aspiring to serve in the top leadership role in school districts throughout Mississippi.

The results of the study added to the current body of knowledge regarding women serving in the top leadership role within the K-12 public education setting in Mississippi.

Research Questions

The guiding questions of this study were:

1. What were the perceptions of women who are currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi regarding barriers to the superintendency?
2. What were the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi?

Qualitative Design and Positionality

Qualitative researchers value the actual research process itself as much as the resulting product (Bourke, 2014; England, 1994). According to Bourke (2014), “The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher’s beliefs, political stance, and cultural background are important variables that affect the research process” (p. 2). Since the researcher and the participants are equally engaged in the research process (England, 1994), all participants, the interviewer and the interviewees, have the potential to impact the results of the study (Bourke, 2014).

A researcher’s positionality results when subjectivism and objectivism meet (Freire, 1970). From the very beginning of the dissertation process when I identified my own topic of interest and research questions, my own positionality as a female assistant superintendent in Mississippi fueled both my passion and energy for this research. Also, during the time I was working on the preproposal for this dissertation, the superintendent with whom I worked for several years retired. As a result, I applied for the position of superintendent. The experience of the application process added another dimension to my own positionality, with regard to this research study, as I experienced first-hand the challenges women in Mississippi face as they aspire to the superintendency. As I proceeded with this research study, I believed that recognizing and acknowledging my own potential biases, as the researcher, due to my past experiences, was critical in
preserving the integrity of this research. Most importantly, as a qualitative researcher, the act of communicating my positionality enabled readers to consider its influence on the research.

Positionality Statement

I am a learner, a reader, and a stubborn, determined woman. My mother was a single parent during the 1960s - well before being a single parent was “in vogue.” Not having a father figure in my life and watching my mother work tirelessly made me determined to be successful in my own rite. My mother was relentless in teaching me to take care of myself, to make up my own mind about matters, and she would stop at nothing to make certain that whatever I did, I was the best at it. She expected me to be self-sufficient. I was nothing like most girls who were in my classes at school. I was driven and always out to learn more, work harder, and to achieve a level of success greater than those around me. This drive was never simply to outdo my fellow students, boys nor girls; I was primarily competing with myself. The drive to always strive for more was instilled in me by my mother. It was her gift (and sometimes I might say it was a curse) to me.

At an early age, I knew I wanted to become a teacher. In the same manner as I had always done everything else, I set about preparing myself for teaching with all the gusto I could muster. College did not, however, prepare me for the real world of teaching young children. My first teaching assignment was at an all Black school. I was the only White person in the entire school – this included teachers and students. My own upbringing was mostly in a White world even though I did have friends who were Black. I had little experience with teaching, in general, but I had zero experience with teaching and
interacting with poor, Black children and their parents. In my middle class, White world, I went home to a safe, loving environment. I was my mother’s world, and she worked tirelessly to ensure I had a warm bed and a full tummy every night. The five-year-old children in my class, however, typically walked home alone, entered an empty house, and were often expected to be self-sufficient at this early age. They frequently came to school hungry because their last meal had been at lunch the previous day at school. Because most of these kindergarten children’s families were focused on surviving, the children often craved attention and were difficult to manage, especially for me, as a first-year teacher. In addition, because this was a school largely populated by students of low socioeconomic status, the resources provided from the district level were inadequate. It was November before I had tables and chairs for my young students. As the only White individual on the campus, the Black teachers were hesitant to befriend or support me. It was a difficult year, but those experiences impacted me significantly, both professionally and personally. In spite of the harsh reality of dealing with the cultural differences in these children’s lives compared to my own childhood, the lack of support from other teachers and the district itself, I survived and wanted to continue in the same career. The fact I survived was largely due to my mother’s dogged insistence from my early years that I must be successful. This extremely difficult situation truly prepared me for my future as an educator.

After the first year of teaching, I held numerous other teaching positions. Each of these assignments was unique. There was never an “easy” year, but I learned how to meet the needs of the children more effectively and became more skilled at engaging families each school year. I learned to adapt to the culture, the oddities, the challenges, and the
unique things that made each teaching setting special. While teaching, I earned a
Master’s degree with a focus on early childhood development. Throughout my years of
teaching, I had the opportunity to teach pre-k through upper elementary school. Each
time I transitioned to another position, I always was certain that this new one was better
than the last. Teaching was not something I did, it literally defined me as an individual. I
never planned to do anything else professionally.

I reached a point in my career where I slowly began “growing” other teachers. Some of these were brand new teachers, while others were colleagues having trouble
transitioning to current changes in education. The feeling of satisfaction I had previously
received from teaching children was fueled by the excitement that I experienced as I
mentored fellow educators and celebrated their success. I had the opportunity to move
into an Instructional Coach position where I continued “growing” teachers and helping to
ensure success in their own classrooms. This was a difficult transition at first because I
loved teaching children. I came to the realization that I could have a greater impact by
helping numerous other teachers be successful in their classes as opposed to the impact I
would have if I only served students in my own classroom.

As I moved from the classroom, I decided I wanted to work toward another
advanced degree. I began working on my Specialist’s degree while serving as
Instructional Coach at the upper elementary school level. It was during this time that our
school district implemented professional learning communities. My interest in leading
teachers to collaborate, learn and study together, and embrace embedded professional
development caused me to begin researching this particular area. Initially, I thought this
might be an area that I might want to research if I moved into the doctoral program.
Throughout the remainder of my specialist’s program, I researched adult learning theories and applied these theories to the effective use of professional learning communities. Even though I was unsure of what role I would take on in my future as an educator, I decided to continue my education and entered the doctoral program in educational leadership at The University of Southern Mississippi. While I was very successful in my coursework, I was extremely unsettled about a potential dissertation topic. I was getting constant feedback from teachers and fellow students that I should simply take the topic that I researched for my specialist’s degree and expand upon it for my dissertation. Quite frankly, I did not really want to know anything more about this topic. I could not seem to identify a question about professional learning communities that was not completely saturated in the literature. I was advised by fellow students and even some teachers to “Just get the dissertation done.” But, alas, I am not that kind of girl. I just could not see myself pouring all my heart and soul into a topic that mildly interested me. This dilemma coincided with the department making radical changes in the degree requirements and a complete restructuring of the entire Educational Leadership program. After much frustration and increasing professional responsibilities, I became a full-fledged dropout.

During the doctoral dilemma, I was moved from Instructional Coach at the upper elementary school to Assistant Principal at the third and fourth grade school. I served in this position for a year and a half when the district made some bold, sweeping changes in leadership at several schools. I was abruptly moved from the Assistant Principal position to Principal of the kindergarten, first, and second grade school. This transition landed me in a deeply dysfunctional setting where radical changes had to be made immediately. Never in my life had anything consumed me more than when I served as Principal. While
this period of time was one of the most stressful periods in my life, I found myself repeatedly pulling from the deep inner strength instilled in me by my mother.

Within about a year, our school made significant changes, and we began to soar. The overall culture of the school grew from one of discontent and apathy to a culture of learning. Student achievement became the primary emphasis, and as a result, our kindergarten, first, and second grade students demonstrated significant academic gains on the nationally normed assessment. Also, the faculty evolved from working in isolation to collaborating to do what was best for children. The principalship changed the direction of my professional life. As a teacher, an Instructional Coach, and an Assistant Principal, I performed leadership duties from within the organization. These opportunities prepared me for what was ahead for me, but they were rather limiting in terms of allowing me to see beyond the scope of those responsibilities. As Principal, however, I was able to synthesize all of the skills, dispositions, and strengths I had acquired over time to serve in a very demanding leadership role. My own professional growth began to include collaborating with other female instructional leaders. I became interested in the problems, frustrations, successes, challenges, and limitations female administrators experience. It was also at this point I became slightly aware of the role gender plays advancing to higher positions in the field of education. Because of my upbringing, I had never even considered that my rights or opportunities would be impacted by my gender.

Following three years of service as Principal, I was asked by the superintendent to move to the position of Assistant Superintendent. As Principal, I had led my school in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Dr. Buchanan, my superintendent, felt I possessed the understanding of curriculum, instruction, and leadership skills to
guide our district throughout this process. I am currently serving in this capacity. In this role, I have become even more aware of the challenges, frustrations, and trials female superintendents experience. Last spring, for example, one of my colleagues, was ousted from her position as superintendent almost overnight. As I read of the events and watched the news, I reflected on the differences in the manner in which this was being handled with this female superintendent compared to what typically occurs with men who are serving in this same capacity. Noting these disparities repeatedly fueled my fire to become more informed on the history of female superintendents and what trends/behaviors are noted in those who have been successful.

Following my transition to Assistant Superintendent, I was selected to participate in the Mississippi School Board Association’s Superintendents’ Leadership Academy. This group of potential future superintendents included a small group of females. Yet again, I found myself asking, “Why are there so few females in this group of potential future superintendents?” This question sparked a renewed interest in completing my doctoral studies. For the first time, I identified a topic that I felt was worthy of being studied. It is not one that someone else felt I should study. It was at this time I knew I was at peace with my decision about my dissertation topic. For the first time, I owned it myself. It was not given to me; it is my own. I began learning about qualitative research and knew immediately that this type of research design was best suited to me, as a learner. For the first time, I began to notice glimpses of what I termed, “The Good Ole’ Boys’ Club.” The more I attended professional functions, the more I noticed the difference between the numbers of men versus female superintendents; for the first time in my life, I began to sense a difference in the way other male superintendents and
assistant superintendents responded to me, as a woman in my position of assistant superintendent. These experiences even further validated my decision to research female superintendents in Mississippi.

Quite unexpectedly, my superintendent retired last spring. At that time, I had to make a decision about whether I would apply for the position of superintendent. Even though serving in this role had not been a life-long goal, I felt I was the best person for the job at that time. Our district was in the midst of huge shifts with the implementation of new standards along with a new accountability model. I knew our history, the path we had traveled, and most importantly, I fully understood the direction that our district should move. Therefore, I decided to apply. At that point, I knew that I was about to “walk in the steps of my own dissertation.” I spent quite a bit of time preparing the application for the position and for the interview process. Throughout this whole time, I was constantly reflecting on my dissertation topic and comparing my own experiences to what I had read in all of my research. It turns out that the “Good Ole Boy system” is, in fact, alive and well in south Mississippi. I learned a lot about myself during this time. Most importantly, I came to understand the complex web through which women in leadership roles must navigate in order to succeed. I was not even selected to interview for the position of superintendent. The school board interviewed two men and hired our new superintendent who is 36 years old. He had less than one-half of the years of experience I, only spent three years as a classroom teacher, and moved several times in his young life to take the next step forward. While this young man possessed a multitude of positive attributes and I held nothing at all against him, the entire experience of applying for superintendent, not being selected to interview for the position, and
ultimately, being completely disregarded as a worthy candidate for the position, opened my eyes to the challenges women encounter.

Just a short time ago, I would never have believed that being a woman was a disadvantage in terms of advancing to a higher position professionally. But now I know that, in fact, it truly is. I have come to understand that the fact that I was such a strong, determined, independent woman essentially shielded me from recognizing and acknowledging this type of barrier throughout my life. Perhaps I did come across some type of gender bias before and simply did not recognize it because it just was not a part of my schema. I never even conceived that, because I am a woman, I would encounter bias of any sort. Now, however, I know the truth. This dissertation became much more than a requirement for my degree. It was my personal journey to the truth, and it literally become a part of me and who I am. As I read, conducted interviews, and observed the female superintendents, I strived to understand the challenges female superintendents in Mississippi face as they aspire to the superintendency, along with barriers faced during the time of their tenure. Also, I searched for an understanding of the perceived character traits, dispositions, and attitudes demonstrated by the female superintendents. It was and still is my belief that women are, at a minimum, equally qualified to serve as the superintendent of a school district. My intent was for this research to represent a voice for all women, especially women in Mississippi, who aspire to top leadership roles in education.

Completing my doctorate may not necessarily provide me with extensive professional opportunities. I have been blessed beyond measure in my career. In fact, many of my colleagues have already retired. I am, however, a learner, and a fighter, and I
know, without a doubt, that this process was always meant to be part of my journey. In truth, it was the journey of a lifetime. Most importantly, it was not my goal to advocate that one’s gender offers an advantage in serving as a better, more competent leader. Instead, it was in service to all leaders – both men and women, especially those in school leadership – to embrace what I learned through my study and to share it. In essence, we are all - superintendents, principals, and teachers – on the same journey – one of serving students and their families. And because we are all striving for the same destination, each of us must celebrate our differences because, ultimately, it is when we embrace and celebrate our diversity that we have the greatest opportunity to impact the lives of our students and our society. As Sandberg (2013) emphasized:

We can do this – for ourselves, for one another, for our daughters, and for our sons. If we push hard now, this next wave can be the last wave. In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders. (p. 172)

Definition of Terms

1. Gender – biological differences that determine a person’s gender (Foster, 1999; Lugg, 2003).

2. Gender gap – the difference between men and women in reference to factors such as social, political, intellectual, cultural, or economic attainments or attitudes (Boushey, 2009; Morrison, 2012).

3. Gender equity - parity between men and women in various factors such as their quality of life, scholastic achievements, and career opportunities (Klein, Kramarae, & Richardson, 2007; Nelli, 2014).
4. Gender revolution - a period of time, typically during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s when sweeping changes occurred related to gender equity (England, 2010).

5. Internal/Self-imposed barriers – challenges or events that prevent or inhibit progress which are voluntarily assumed by the individual (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Morrison, 2012).

6. External barriers – For the purposes of this study, external barriers referred to challenges or obstacles imposed on an individual and beyond her control.

7. Superintendent- “the school board employee who is responsible for administering the operations and activities of schools within the district and for implementing the decisions of the school board. The superintendent holds a valid Class AA license in school administration” (MDE, 2014, p. 85).

Assumptions

The assumptions of the study were as follows:

1. The women superintendent participants responded to the interview questions openly and honestly.

2. The women superintendent participants were administering school districts in Mississippi during the 2014-2015 school year.

3. The list of superintendents provided on the Mississippi Department of Education’s website, the source used for identifying the female superintendents, was correct and complete.

Summary

In spite of the women’s movements of the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s, little progress for women occurred since the early 1990s. Today’s women often fail to
acknowledge that the gender revolution has stalled, causing this phenomenon to be labeled as the “no problem problem” (Rhode, 2014, p. 19). The stalling of the gender revolution impacted women’s opportunities for upward mobility into leadership roles in business, politics, and education (Sandberg, 2013). In spite of the fact that more women than men are receiving advanced degrees (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013; England, 2010), women remained underrepresented in the work force and in leadership roles. In addition, women with the same qualifications as men were often paid less than men in the same positions (AAUW, 2014).

Even though approximately 84% of Mississippi’s classroom teachers were women (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012), only 23% of the 2014-2015 superintendents in Mississippi were women (MDE, 2014a). The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the phenomenon of continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi. The study sought to understand perceived barriers facing women Mississippi superintendents. In addition, the study also strived to understand the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of female superintendents leading districts in Mississippi.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature relative to this research study. The chapter begins with a historical overview of educational opportunities for women, followed by information related to the emergence of school administrators in the United States, the creation and evolution of the superintendency, a description of the expectations for the 21st century superintendent, women’s evolution into the superintendency, and statistics related to women serving in the superintendency. In addition, a synthesis of research related to female superintendents were analyzed using constructs relative to feminist theory, feminist poststructuralism, and feminist standpoint theory.

Theoretical Frameworks

While there are numerous theories and theoretical frameworks related to the experiences of women, this study was framed within feminist theory, feminist poststructuralist, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks. Maintaining the highest leadership role in Mississippi’s public schools, these women represented a fraction of the overall population of Mississippi superintendents. Feminist theory provided a lens through which the uniqueness of these women’s experiences were studied. In addition, as female superintendents shared their stories of leading alongside men, as their equals, the construct of power and its impact on female superintendents guided my analysis of these women’s experiences. Feminist poststructuralism allowed me, as the researcher, to understand the experiences of these female superintendents as they served in a leadership
role that continues to be largely dominated by men. In doing so, the application of the feminist poststructuralist framework framed my discussion of the women’s dialogue and discourse, experiences, and perceptions based upon the premise that their gender impacted their own perception of the world. Finally, feminist standpoint theory provided a lens through which these superintendents’ personhood, as women in leadership roles, were embraced and celebrated as their own source of empowerment.

*Evolution of Feminist Theory in the United States*

Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were openly critical of male dominance (Flax, 1979; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). The power of men over women impacted almost every facet of women’s lives. The new feminists of the 1960s and early 1970s expressed contempt related to the ongoing control of men over women in education, religion, government, and the economy. Marriage, family, and sexuality issues seemed to dominate the challenges for women during this time (Friedan, 1997; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Tong, 1998). Much of the debate related to feminism during this era excluded those issues associated with women and race, ethnicity, and social class (Wheat, 2012). As a result, theories also excluded these issues that, in fact, impacted large numbers of women (Flax, 1979; Tong, 1998; Wheat, 2012).

Flax (1979) discussed specific assumptions related to feminist theory. First, this theory assumes that women and men have unique and different background experiences, and one of the tasks of feminist theory is to explain these differences (Frye, 1990; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009). Flax (1979) stated that feminist theory “assumes that the oppression of women is part of the way the structure of the world is organized” (p. 81); likewise, another intent of feminist theory is to provide an explanation of the evolution of this
structure and how, along with why, it resulted as such. Feminist theory also assumes the notion of *patriarchy*, a system where men have power over women (Flax, 1979; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009). In other words, “power is attached to gender” (Flax, 1979, p. 82). Feminist theorists, then, attempt to provide explanations of why this occurs (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Aston, Price, Kirk, & Penney, 2011; Barrett, 2005; Flax, 1979; Wood, 2009).

*Feminist Poststructuralism Theory*

Feminist poststructuralism theory is based on the “view that binary opposites within the discourses of society” (Dressman, 2008, p. 39) are constantly in conflict with one another (Grogan, 1996). Poststructuralists propose that social order and what individuals perceive as reality are not naturally occurring (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Barrett, 2005; Wood, 2009). For example, the role of an individual’s gender, in fact, results from both historic and cultural biases. Poststructural feminists argue that it is the beliefs, not necessarily reality, regarding socially accepted male and female behaviors that actually define expectations for men and women (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Aston et. al., 2012; Dressman, 2008; Grogan, 1996, 1998).

In addition, these theorists propose that the “lesser half of a binary pair” (Dressman, 2008, p. 41), (women, for example, compared to men), are simply part of “an artificial, historical process of differentiation whose agenda is to distribute power and the resources inequitably within the world” (Dressman, 2008, p. 41). Also, poststructural feminists propose that changing this inequity is virtually impossible without a substantial change in the structure of the organization, population, and other existing structures

Feminist poststructuralists use a combination of categories called constructs to compare the practices of women and men (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Aston et al., 2011; Barrett, 2005; Dressman, 2008; Grogan, 1996, 2008; Wood, 2009). Grogan (2008) emphasizes the complexity of women’s experiences because they tend to be largely impacted by gender. Application of the constructs, “language and discourse, subject and subjectivity, power, and common sense” (Grogan, 2008, p. 653) with regard to specific studies relates to women, provides a lens through which women’s experiences were analyzed. This perspective provided me, as the researcher, an opportunity to consider the various experiences and interactions of women and to explore the interaction of gender and female superintendents’ experiences (DiPalma & Ferguson, 2006; Grogan, 2008).

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory, in general, emphasizes the construction of knowledge based on various factors such as location, historical and cultural features, and interests of the groups of individuals (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005; Wood, 2009). According to Sprague (2005), “a standpoint is not the spontaneous thinking of a person or a category of people. Rather, it is the combination of resources available within a specific context from which an understanding might be constructed” (p. 41). Standpoint theorists argue that women’s knowledge, based on their own experiences, provides a better vantage point, compared to theories developed by men, in order to truly understand the world (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005).
Sprague (2005) also discussed the various ways that political scientists conceptualize power. The major source of power is viewed as something that can be “exchanged, taken, or given away” (Sprague, 2005, p. 42). This is known as the capitalist standpoint. The workers’ standpoint, however, centers on the “capitalist/worker relationship” (Sprague, 2005, p. 42) and includes the workers’ viewing themselves as subordinates and capitalists having power over them. This relationship is represented by a sense of domination of the capitalists over the workers (Sprague, 2005).

In addition to the capitalists’ and workers’ standpoints related to power, the feminist standpoint theory attempts to explain power related to “the sexual division of labor” (Sprague, 2005, p. 42) that is typical in our culture (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005; Wood, 2009). This theory is constructed around the knowledge and experiences of women who represent a diverse range of race, class, and other types of “social domination” (Sprague, 2005, p. 41). For example, women continue to be largely responsible for tending to meals, domestic chores, and generally meeting the various needs of their spouses and children. These behaviors then place the woman in a nurturing role. As the nurturer, the woman is in a position for opportunities to “develop a notion of power” (Sprague, 2005, p. 42). The standpoint of women, then, provides resources, unlike their male counterparts, to use their unique skills as a source of empowerment in order for women to reach their full potential (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005; Wood, 2009).

The role that gender plays in today’s society will continue to be revealed as women, like me, value their own personhood and are not necessarily defined by the fact that they happen to be female. My readings and my own personal experiences, as a
woman, offered a unique perspective with regard to this study. While each of the theories described above offered valuable assumptions with regard to feminist theory, I used a combination of these theories as a lens through which the data were analyzed. This approach revealed the complexities of the ongoing struggles for 21st century female superintendents in Mississippi and allowed me, as the researcher, to more thoroughly respond to the research questions.

Women - Destined to Rule

In 1909, following her appointment as the first female superintendent of the Chicago School District, Ella Flagg Young boldly stated:

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future, we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is woman’s natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show cities and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man. (as cited in Blount, 1998, p. 1)

With this bold statement, Ms. Young seemed to be predicting a surge in the number of women rising to the top leadership position within the United States educational system, the superintendency. Unfortunately, Ms. Young’s prediction did not transpire. In 1910, immediately following Ms. Young’s proclamation, 6.19% of the superintendents of local school districts in the United States were women. A gradual restructuring of school districts that eliminated most intermediate (county) districts
naturally resulted in a significant reduction of school districts in general. For example, the reorganization resulted in “the number of intermediate districts plummeting from 3,095 in 1950 to one-fifth that number by 1990” (Blount, 1998, p. 4). The number of school superintendents was reduced as a result of the decrease in the number of districts. This reduction significantly impacted women’s representation in the superintendency, reducing it to 1.68% by 1930 and continuing to spiral down to a low of .70% by 1970. In general, the restructuring of school districts greatly impacted the number of women serving as superintendents throughout the United States (The Western Journal of Education, 1909, p. 515, as cited in Blount, 1998).

Historical Overview of Educational Opportunities for Women

In order to understand the passion that Ella Flagg Young demonstrated in her statement related to women’s destiny as school leaders, one must review the history of women’s roles in public education within the United States. Earliest attempts at educating women in the 1700s were primarily centered upon becoming skilled at household responsibilities and finding a suitable husband. During this time, girls were often taught to read for the sole purpose of studying the Bible. The literacy instruction for girls was far less stringent than the instruction provided for boys (Hoffman, 2003; Schwager, 1987). Also included in girls’ education were social etiquette, sewing, cooking, and music. The 1800s, however, presented the most significant changes for women in education. The term “seminary” (Blount, 1998, p. 15) was used to describe schools for women during this time. These schools were considered to be less focused on prior topics such as etiquette, and so on; rather, the institutions that developed were far more serious and sought to provide equal educational opportunities for women. Pioneers of this
movement included Sarah Pierce, Catharine Beecher, Emma Willard, and Mary Lyon. The institutions these women founded eventually laid the groundwork for women to receive formal training as teachers (Blount, 1998; Hoffman, 2003; Schwager, 1987).

After teaching for several years, Sarah Pierce opened an “academy” (Blount, 1998, p. 15), specifically for women, in Connecticut. In 1823, one of Pierce’s teachers, Catharine Beecher, rented a small room in Hartford and established her own school as well, known as Hartford Female Seminary. Beecher’s school, which became one of the most widely respected educational institutions for women. In order to compete with the elite academic opportunities that young men received at this time, another pioneer educator for young women, Emma Willard, founded the Troy Female Seminary (Hoffman, 2003; Schwager, 1987). Initially, Willard requested funding for her school from the governor of New York. Even though this request was denied, Troy grew to become a significant stimulus for women’s “intellectual, political, social, and economic growth” (Blount, 1998, p. 15) and was viewed as “an important source of feminism and the incubator of a new style of female personality” (Schwager, 1987, p. 343). Another pioneer of early women’s education was Mary Lyon. Lyon contributed to these new educational opportunities for women when she established Mt. Holyoke, which became the “first fully endowed women’s institution” (Blount, 1998, p. 15). All of these women’s institutions provided opportunities for women to receive an education and supported them in preparation for their careers as teachers (Blount, 1998; Hoffman, 2003; Schwager, 1987).

As these new educational opportunities emerged, women gained independence previously not possible and often used their salaries to live independently of their
families. This independence provided a safety net for women in that they were no longer *trapped* or forced to marry a man their family selected. Rather, it allowed them freedom to make their own choices for marriage. Having their own classrooms also provided a sense of authority and security. Their classrooms became these women’s own domains – where they could make choices independent of men. More opportunities for education led to increased opportunities for women to gain even more respectable positions in the field of education. In 1871, Harriette J. Cook became the first woman professor in the United States at Cornell College in Iowa. In addition to making history as the first female college professor, Cook also garnered a salary equivalent to that of her male colleagues (Blount, 1998; Hoffman, 2003).

**Politics and the Emergence of School Administrators**

According to Lugg (2003), educators and researchers specifically focused on educational leadership generally avoided discussing and acknowledging “deep structural issues regarding socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, and how these shape ‘who gets what, when, and how’” (p. 96) in public schools throughout the United States. However, according to Lugg (2003), “Each of these deep structural features is intrinsic to the U.S. political culture. Therefore, they are repeatedly made manifest in various governmental forums, including public schools” (p. 96). As far back as the Civil War, when women stepped into teaching roles as men left for war, the politics of gender grew to represent a divisive factor within the field of education in the United States. Upon their return from war, many men, who previously served as teachers, exited the teaching profession in large masses (Schwager, 1987), possibly due to the low salaries available following war times and because men viewed teaching as “woman’s
work” (Blount, 1998, p. 33). A dramatic shift occurred during this time, resulting in the “feminization of teaching” (Blount, 1999, p. 55), where the majority of teacher positions were held by women. In addition, this feminization process altered previously held perceptions of teaching as gender neutral to more gender biased views. These newly adopted views assigned “middle-class femininity” and “women’s proper social roles” (Blount, 1999, p. 55) as expectations for all schoolteachers. Essentially, teaching had grown to be perceived as women’s work (Blount, 1999; Hoffman, 2003).

According to Lugg (2003), “This was an era when social roles and employment were fraught with stringent and highly differentiated gender expectations” (p. 105). Men who continued teaching were viewed with skepticism and considered unmanly or committing an act of gender deviance (Blount, 1996, 1999; Chauncey, 1994; Clifford, 1989; Lugg, 2003; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Women were expected to remain unmarried in order to continue teaching. As a result, many women chose not to marry. However, female teachers were subject to regulations regarding their personal behavior if they desired continued employment as a teacher. To ensure compliance, community members closely watched the female teachers, a practice that teachers referred to as “snoopervision” (Lugg, 2003, p. 105). Essentially, female teachers endured the invasion of their own personal privacy in order to keep their teaching positions (Hoffman, 2003; Lugg, 2003).

In the early twentieth century, public schools expanded to include high schools, resulting in significant increases in the number of students enrolled (Lugg, 2003). As a result of the increased enrollment due to the addition of the high schools, public schools were forced to adhere to policies and regulations designed to increase the coherence and
efficiency of the educational organization (Lugg, 2003). Using Callahan’s business model (1962, as cited in Lugg, 2003), the position of male administrators emerged resulting in a means of delineating gender specific roles and expectations in education (Blount, 1999; Lugg, 2003). Generally, men who previously served as teachers naturally evolved into these administrative positions at the high schools (Blount, 1999; Hoffman, 2003; Lugg, 2003). Within a relatively short period of time, educational administration evolved into an attractive career path for ambitious male educators (Blount, 1998; Lugg, 2003; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The school board, as opposed to the voting public, began to take on the role of grooming these male administrators (Blount, 1998). According to Blount (1998), this resulted in defining the new profession of male administrators as one for married men with appropriate academic qualifications.

Teachers were resistant to the addition of these male school administrators, primarily due to the increase in administrators’ autonomy, status, and authority, and their own loss in each of these areas. Male school administrators set themselves apart from female teachers, and as their power and autonomy increased, that of female teachers’ decreased (Blount, 1998; Hoffman, 2003). As a result of the rise in the number of men entering educational administration, women increasingly dominated the vast majority of the teaching force, resulting in further feminization of the teaching profession (Blount, 1999; Hoffman, 2003; Lugg, 2003). This pattern continued, and as more men entered into educational administration, the more feminized teaching became (Blount, 1999; Hoffman, 2003).

Historically, gender and sexual orientation were two of the prickliest political issues related to public education in the United States (Lugg, 2003), each significantly
impacting public education with regard to curriculum, disciplinary codes and expectations, policies related to personnel, and many other areas (Blount, 1996; Lugg, 2003; Pinar, 1998). In the 1950s, politics related to both gender and sexuality significantly impacted the field of educational administration. By this time, the public had become extremely homophobic, making it critical that male administrators continually promote their *maleness*. According to Blount (1996, 1999, as cited in Lugg, 2003, p. 110), “public school administrators had to be demonstrably non-queer”; thus, creating the ideal administrator as one who was “male, married, and masculine” (Lugg, 2003, p. 110). Since the 1970s, there has been extensive litigation regarding gender and sexuality in U.S. public schools, indicating the degree to which politics impacted public education in the United States (Lugg, 2003).

**Creation and Evolution of the Superintendency**

While schools were largely controlled locally, state education agencies were created in the early 1800s. These agencies required that all local school boards provide an adequate education for the students (Blount, 1998). Many communities were in support of using some taxpayers’ money to support the local schools, but there were also a number of communities who were opposed to paying taxes for local school districts. In addition, most state education agencies were resistant to federal intervention into matters related to school governance (Blount, 1998; Geib, 1985). However, The Land Ordinance of 1785, a federal initiative, was passed requiring that monies raised from every section of land on Lot 16 in each town be paid to the local school district (Geib, 1985). In 1812, New York assigned the first superintendent to supervise 16th section land (Blount, 1998).
Following New York’s lead, other states began to implement the position of the superintendent, and by 1890, all states had created the office of the superintendent (Blount, 1998; Carter & Cunningham, 1997). School systems began to select county superintendents, officials who were typically elected from within the county’s boundaries (Blount, 1998). In addition, individual school boards often governed their own school systems, typically creating several city districts within a county. As a result, these districts began hiring (instead of electing) their own superintendents to govern the school systems (Blount, 1998). District and city superintendents were typically selected and appointed by the school board. Men were quickly promoted from teaching into these administrative positions, and consequently, given more authority, control, and independence as educators (Blount, 1998).

The responsibilities of superintendents evolved from initially supervising the sale of 16th section land to compiling school statistics, visiting schools, and leading instructional meetings (Blount, 1998). Callahan (1962, 1966, as cited in AASA, 2010) conceptualized the evolution of superintendents’ various roles and responsibilities as they changed over time. Between 1865 and 1910, the superintendent’s role was characterized as that of teacher and/or scholar (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Cuban (1976) emphasized the school boards’ expectations for the superintendent during this era, stating:

It must be made his recognized duty to train teachers and inspire them with high ideals; to revise the course of study when new light shows that improvement is possible; to see that pupils and teachers are supplied with needed appliances for the best possible work; to devise rational methods of promoting pupils. (p. 16)
In other words, the superintendent was expected to serve as an instructional leader and ensure that teachers adequately equipped to perform their jobs successfully.

In approximately 1920, following the era of superintendent as scholar, the superintendent’s primary role evolved into that of business manager. This coincided with the Industrial Revolution; thus, theories related to management impacted the role and expectations for school superintendents. The emphasis shifted from superintendents serving as teacher leaders to managers of organizations (schools). Schneider (1994) stated that the superintendent’s role, as business manager, eventually led to the perception of a controlled culture. The superintendent’s role was associated with an “authoritative, impersonal, and task-oriented set of values and beliefs” (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 3). This role remained dominant for nearly three decades (Kowalski et al., 2011). According to Blount (1999), “Just as teaching is described as having been feminized, it is just as fitting to describe the administrative realm as having been masculinized” (p. 66).

Because of the collapse of the stock market during the Great Depression, citizens began to doubt the effectiveness of educational practices guided by business and management theories (Kowalski et al., 2011). As a result, the superintendent’s role shifted from that of a business executive toward a more democratic and people-oriented approach (Grogan, 2000). The superintendent was characterized as a scholarly statesman whose role focused upon mobilizing community resources, garnering support for public schools, and utilizing a democratic approach to leading the school district (Kowalski et al., 2011). In 1946, the *American School Board Journal* described the expectations for a
successful superintendent, clearly indicating the expectation for the superintendent’s
gender:

The man selected could not be labeled as an effeminate being. He was a
former collegiate athletic hero. His physique was comparable to any of the
mythical Greed gods. He was truly the ultimate in manliness. (Kowalski et al.,
2011, pp. 21-22)

The clarity of the description for the expectations of the superintendent provided
no room for misinterpretation and no intent to include women in these leadership
opportunities. As a result, women’s leadership opportunities in the superintendency were
essentially non-existent. The end of World War II sparked a growth in student enrollment
and consolidation of schools. In addition, a greater interest in research resulted in new
approaches to administering schools. The concept of selecting a group of representatives
(similar to a school board of trustees) to make decisions related to school policies became
accepted as an effective approach (Blount, 1998; Kowalski et al., 2011). The democratic
approach, evidenced when the superintendent’s role was that of statesman, was deemed
idealistic and considered to be ineffective for addressing post-World War II social and
economic problems. In order to address these larger social issues, superintendents worked
to solve education woes by conducting research and expanding their own level of
competency and professionalism.

Doctoral programs frequently required educational administration students to
complete coursework in at least one of the behavioral sciences (Kowalski et al., 2011).
Superintendents’ roles, then, developed into that of an applied social scientist. Critics of
this focus emphasized that superintendents grew to be experts in these behavioral
sciences and possessed a great deal of knowledge, but they had little understanding of how to utilize the information in order to facilitate progress of the school district (Kowalski et al., 2011). Grogan (2000) stated that superintendents’ responsibilities mirrored those adopted by the military and government agencies along with the business world. As a result, superintendents focused upon fiscal affairs, management of school facilities, and strategic planning.

With the publication of *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), superintendents were charged with leading the standards-based movement of the 1990s with the goal of increasing the academic performance of students. Additionally, an increase in community involvement forced superintendents to respond to challenges from the public regarding dissatisfaction with the public schools (Kowalski et al., 2011; Page-Hite, 2004). To guide the next generation of superintendents, the American Association of School Administrators (1992, as cited in Canole & Young, 2013) provided an outline of the expectations for superintendents in the following areas: leadership and district culture, policy and governance, communications and community relations, organizational management, curriculum planning and development, instructional management, human resources management, and values of ethical leadership.

Simultaneously, during the 1990s, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), a collaborative group of education representatives from various educational leadership organizations, partnered to create the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to design standards of practice for educational leaders (as cited in Canole & Young, 2013). The ISLLC standards were initially released
in 1996. By 2005, 46 states had adopted the ISLLC standards or a moderately revised version with the goal of defining accepted educational leadership practices (Canole & Young, 2013; Murphy, Young, Crow, & Ogawa, 2009; Sanders & Simpson, 2005). With these two major organizations, AASA and the ISLLC, outlining standards of practice for educational leaders, school districts throughout the country possessed a common language to discuss and outline the work of all educational leaders, including those of the superintendent. This shift resulted in the expectation that the superintendent’s vision should be centered upon instructional leadership (Canole & Young, 2013; Jones, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009). This change occurred largely as a result of the changing expectations for students to reach higher academic outcomes, which were closely tied to school districts’ accountability (and ultimately, districts’ funding) (Canole & Young, 2013; Lassiter, 2012).

Superintendents whose vision centered upon instructional leadership possessed an understanding of the educational leadership practices that were closely tied to increasing student achievement, how students learned, strategies for increasing student engagement, and building teacher and leadership capacity within schools and across the district (Canole & Young, 2013; Jones, 2012; Lassiter, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The ISLLC standards were revised in 2008 and are currently being revised, in an effort to meet the changing demands of school leaders such as superintendents, with an expected publication date of 2014 (Canole & Young, 2013; CCSSO, 2014).

The Superintendency of the 21st Century

It is impossible to consider the present-day role of the school superintendent without first considering the context within which he or she must function. As stated
previously, the role of the school superintendent constantly evolved in order to adjust to the never-ending changes associated with public education in America (Fullan, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2011). Dan Domenech, Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators, summarized current expectations for today’s superintendents:

The superintendent is the voice for all the children in the community, including the many children that would have no voice if not for the superintendent. Today, more than ever, America’s superintendents have the awesome responsibility to protect public education from the private and political interests that regard our schools as investment opportunities for corporate gains rather than fostering the American tradition of an educated community that is the core of our democratic process. (as cited in AASA, 2010, p. iii)

Significant changes, in both academic related requirements and in the students and staff who populate public schools throughout the United States, forced school superintendents to step into the role of change agents (Fullan, 2001). In addition, the “face of America’s school superintendent” (Domenech, 2011, as cited in Kowalski et al., 2011, p. xiii) changed simultaneously as schools became increasingly more diverse (Fullan, 2001; Lassiter, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Schmoker, 2006). Expectations for superintendents of the 21st century focused on their role in increasing student learning and achievement while at the same time:

balancing the diversification of their student and staff populations, the explosion of technology, and the digital divide, an expanded set of expectations from the federal level, the media, and board and community relations, all in the context of
an increasingly globalized education system. (Domenech, 2011, as cited in Kowalski et al., 2011, p. xiii)

In spite of an economic recession, today’s superintendents are charged with the implementation of new policies, often dipping into the district’s budget. In 2015, for example, many students across the country, including those in Mississippi, were required to complete a new accountability assessment. Even though testing online was not be required for the first year, districts anticipated eventually assessing students’ mastery of the educational standards using the online testing format (MDE, 2011). This mandate forced superintendents to invest significant dollars into computers and additional connectivity measures. The federal government also demanded that schools offer innovative programs and reform initiatives, such as the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, in order to prepare our students to be 21st century learners (MDE, 2011).

In addition to following federal mandates, school districts throughout the country are required to meet the expectations of their own state governing body. In Mississippi, superintendents were forced to provide monies for multiple unfunded mandates. For example, in 2012, Mississippi’s Governor Phil Bryant, signed House Bill 1031 (Mississippi Legislature, 2012), requiring that school districts screen kindergarten and first grade students for dyslexia. The testing alone was an added expense, along with securing enough personnel to conduct the screenings. In addition, this same bill established scholarships to enable dyslexic students to attend private schools. The scholarships, however, were derived from the public school’s state funding, thus reducing the allotment for individual districts at the local level (Mississippi Legislature, 2012) and
moving the monies to private entities. Essentially, the 21st century superintendent was expected to demonstrate competency with budgetary skills and to accomplish more with fewer resources (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Superintendents are also expected to serve as a voice and an advocate, both individually and collectively, for policy development at the local, state, and federal levels. Dan Domenech stated, “The weight of these voices and their collective experience are vital contributions to the debates that shape the face of America’s public schools” (as cited in Kowalski et al., 2011, p. xiii). In this “information-based society” (as cited in Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 4), superintendents’ responsibilities require them to become accomplished communicators (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Hoyt, 2007; Palladino et al., 2007; Ryan, 2012). As head communicator, the superintendent of the 21st century is expected to facilitate collaborative dialogue with all of the stakeholders of the school district. Instead of a top-down approach, where information is simply passed down from the superintendent to stakeholders, the relational model of communication is recommended to facilitate open, two-way dialogue, along with reducing the perception of formality and power previously associated with the superintendent’s role (Hoyt, 2007; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011; Palladino, Haar, Grady, & Perry, 2007; Ryan, 2012).

While each of these roles for superintendents evolved over the years, gradually shifting from one primary role to the next, based on current social and historical trends, the 21st century superintendent is expected to demonstrate competence in each of these roles. In doing so, today’s superintendents are required to become adept at wearing all of these hats, simultaneously, due to the complexity of leading a school district in the 21st
century (Kowalski et al., 2011). Change agents, masterful communicators, fiscal
magicians, and reflective learners are all critical roles for the 21st century superintendent
(Hoyt, 2007; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011; Palladino et al., 2007;
Ryan, 2012).

Statistics Related to Number of Female Superintendents

In addition to reviewing the historical evolution of the superintendency and
expectations for 21st century superintendents, it is also critical to examine women’s
movement into the superintendency. As early as 1909, Ella Flagg Young expressed
optimism for women’s future opportunities as superintendents, (Blount, 1998), but few
women successfully secured jobs as superintendent during the early years of the
twentieth-century. In 1910, 6.19% of the superintendents of local school districts in the
United States were women. This number decreased to 1.68% by 1930 and continued to
spiral down to a low of .70% in 1970. The same trends followed in the state of
Mississippi with 6% female superintendents serving in 1910 and decreasing to 3% by
1990 (Blount, 1998).

This significant decline occurred for various reasons. The “Golden Age” (Blount,
1999, p. 3) of female school administrators took place prior to World War II. Following
World War II, there was essentially a gender realignment with regard to the
superintendency (Blount, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The baby
boom resulted in significantly large school enrollments throughout the United States,
triggering a shortage of qualified teachers. Many of the women who worked in military-
related industrial jobs during the war returned to teaching during peacetime, solving the
issue of increased student enrollment (Blount, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tyack & Hansot,
1982). Also, millions of men who served in the war returned and sought employment as civilians. In an effort to address the large unemployment rate of veterans, along with honoring these men’s service, many school districts were willing to hire them as teachers. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of men in schools. In addition to being sought by school districts, men who served their country in the war had also earned benefits, such as the G.I. Bill, which provided the opportunity for advanced education. Since these advanced degrees were required in order to attain an administrative position in education, men typically held an advantage over competing women (Blount, 1999). Also, colleges also had quotas for the number of women they would admit. As a result, the G.I. Bill caused many women to lose opportunities for additional schooling (Blount, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tyack & Hansot, 1982) and upward movement into school leadership opportunities (Blount, 1999).

During this time, women who desired to serve as administrators were “viewed as transgressing their gender-appropriate bounds and, thus, were stigmatized” (Blount, 1999, p. 13). Clearly, the progress that women administrators achieved resulted in a step backwards, due to the gender polarization in education occurring after World War II (Blount, 1999). However, when Title IX of the Education Amendment was enacted in 1972, women became more aware of their employment rights, eventually resulting in more women than men graduating from college. In addition, the Women’s Educational Act of 1974 provided funding for research related to women’s employment opportunities in education. Even with the emphasis on women’s rights, there were continuing social pressures for women to stay home and serve their families. While the number of women moving into superintendent roles did not significantly increase during this time, women
became more vocal in demanding greater access to high-level school administrative positions (Blount, 1999).

By 1982, women as superintendents increased to 1.3 percent of the overall population of superintendents in the United States (Brunner, 2000). Gradually, female representation in the superintendency increased, and by 1990, women represented 3.94% of the total number of superintendents across the United States (Blount, 1998). In 1992, 6.6% of U.S. superintendents were females (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), and McGrath predicted that the 1990s would be the “breakthrough decade” (p. 65) for women in terms of achieving parity in leadership positions throughout our country. Specific to education, she predicted more women would be selected as superintendents and would provide leadership needed to reform education in the United States. McGrath (1992) stated, “The women leaders are coming. They are fresh, determined, and ready to work with men to improve our schools” (p. 65). Interestingly enough, The 2000 Study of the American Superintendency (AASA, 2000) revealed women’s representation significantly increased to approximately 13% nationally. Also, by 2010, another significant jump was reported, with up to 24.1% of U.S. superintendents being female (AASA, 2011). Yet, more recent reports revealed a slight decline in the national representation of women as superintendents with 23% in 2013 (AASA, 2013).

Longitudinal data related to the representation of women as superintendents within the state of Mississippi was not available. However, the percent of females as superintendents in Mississippi for the 2014-2015 school year matched the current national percentages (MDE, 2014a). While the numbers representing women who successfully accessed the superintendancy nationally and in Mississippi significantly
increased over time, a considerable discrepancy remained. This discrepancy was even more apparent when considering that roughly 76% of teachers in the United States and 84% in Mississippi were female (AASA, 2011; U. S. Census Bureau, 2012). Clearly, with the number of female teachers, one would suspect a larger percentage of women serving in the superintendent. Both Ella Flagg Young (Blount, 1998) and Sue McGrath (1992) possessed high hopes for a surge in the number of female superintendents. Unfortunately, women continue to be underrepresented in the top leadership role in our nation’s public schools.

A Review of the Perceived Barriers, Dispositions, Traits, and Practices of Female Superintendents

Guided by feminist theory, feminist poststructuralist, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks, the forthcoming section of the literature review examined the perceived barriers, dispositions, traits, and practices currently associated with female superintendents. A review of the literature related to female superintendents revealed over-arching themes relative to the research questions. First, perceived barriers for female superintendents were categorized into internal, external, and historical barriers. Next, literature relating to the dispositions and traits of female superintendents was synthesized to describe common characteristics and qualities. In addition, literature related to the common practices of female superintendents was provided.

According to Grogan (2008), “Superintendents are caught up in external and internal forces over which they have little control” (p. 635). For the purposes of this study, internal barriers included those challenges and obstacles that were self-imposed or assumed by women voluntarily, such as the leadership ambition gap and balancing
household responsibilities with professional obligations (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Morrison, 2012). In contrast, for the purposes of this study, external barriers included challenges and obstacles over which female superintendents themselves had little or no control.

**Internal Barriers**

*Leadership ambition gap.* McCabe (2001) stated, “The career expectations of women are affected by self-imposed gender expectations” (p. 3). Even in the midst of the push for women’s rights, Friedan (1997) reported, “Women spent half their time fighting for their rights, and the other half trying to decide if they wanted them or not” (p. 86). This ongoing inward struggle proved to be typical of many women. Sheryl Sandberg (2013) labeled this as a “leadership ambition gap” (p. 12) and further explained, “Career progression often depends upon taking risks and advocating for oneself – traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting” (p. 15). Recent research indicated that females continually prove to be more academically successful than male counterparts (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Yet, in the workforce, women continue to represent a significant majority of those employed in entry-level positions, while men overwhelmingly fill the bulk of leadership roles (Sandberg, 2013). In education, this resulted in significant female representation in teaching positions and a substantial number of males in the role of superintendent (AASA, 2010).

Whether the internal struggle is related to fear, apathy, or lack of motivation, researchers reported that women often neglect establishing long-range career goals. A lack of motivation for goal setting, thus, impacts leadership opportunities and often impedes women’s opportunities to move up the ladder into the highest positions (Gupton
Sandberg (2013) related the number of ways that internal barriers impacted women:

We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in. We internalize the negative messages we get throughout our lives – the messages that say it’s wrong to be outspoken, aggressive, more powerful than men. We lower our expectations of what we can achieve. We continue to do the majority of the housework and childcare. We compromise our career goals to make room for partners and children who may not even exist yet. (p. 8)

In fact, women frequently receive negative messages related to their capacity for simultaneously serving in top leadership roles and as wives and mothers (Sandberg, 2013). Ostos (2012) stated that early research, dominated by male researchers, indicated women were uninterested in advancing to top leadership roles; however, Adkison (1985) reported both men and women were typically motivated by the same factors, and women were interested and motivated to seek administrative positions. Few people acknowledge the ongoing inner, conflicting dialogue women experience regarding career aspirations (Sandberg, 2013). Gupton and Slick (1996) reported that women also regularly fail to make plans for potential promotions. As a result, promotions for women often occur incidentally, possibly due to their loyalty to the organization or simply because there are no better choices (Gupton & Slick, 1996; McCabe, 2001).

Balancing parenting and spousal responsibilities with professional obligations.

Historically, the role of wife and mother defined the personhood of women in America (Rhode, 2014). The pressures of motherhood, taking care of the family and household
tasks, along with being a wife, often cause women to question themselves and whether they could actually take on the superintendency (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hall, 1996; Ostos, 2012). Hoyt (2007) reported:

Women who have equal-status careers with their husbands not only do more of the child care and household chores, but they also report satisfaction with the amount of work their husbands contribute at home and are critical of their own domestic performance. (p. 272)

In other words, women themselves fail to recognize when their spouse contributes less to the responsibilities associated with being a mother and wife. The Second Shift (Hochschild, 1989), a bestselling book in the late 1980s, emphasized the dilemma women face as they confront the volume of work typically representative of two full shifts of work. Yet, women are so accustomed to these challenges that they fail to even recognize they exist and typically blame themselves if they are unable to maintain both their work and home lives. Many female superintendents reported the responsibilities related to family commitments and responsibilities superseded their own career advancement goals (Barrios, 2004; Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Page-Hite (2004) explained that female superintendents in Mississippi relied on family members for assistance and support, but they reported consistently experiencing feelings of inadequacy related to family responsibilities. Sandberg (2013) emphasized the importance of recognizing these internal obstacles because women can control the negative messages within themselves. In a study involving female superintendents from the tri-state region (Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida), Norwood (2005) reported the majority of these women waited until their own children were in their late teens or older before pursuing the
superintendency. In addition, women even choose to remain single and childless to enable them to meet the demands of the superintendency (Coleman, 2012; Ostos, 2012). The ongoing struggle between career, parenting, and spousal responsibilities was reported as a significant contributor to the internal battle that many women experience as they move into top administrative roles, such as the superintendency (Ostos, 2012).

External Barriers to the Superintendency

The literature review also revealed extensive information related to the external barriers for women in the superintendency. For the purposes of this study, external barriers included challenges beyond the control of the female superintendents such as gender role stereotypes, various pathways to the superintendency, political barriers, inequity in pay, and length of tenure.

Gender role stereotypes. According to Grogan (2008), men and women experience the superintendency differently. Society’s expectation of accepted male and/or female behaviors and attitudes represent an external barrier for female superintendents (Evers & Sieverding, 2014), and today’s “public schools still expect a high degree of gender conformity” (Lugg, 2003, p. 110). Lugg (2003) reported:

The political ambivalence over gender, sexual orientation, and the stringent boundaries of tolerance is reflected in the politics of education...Issues of gender and sexual orientation are a part of the deep structures of public schooling. From issues of certification, to staff hiring and firing, to curricular content, student conduct policies, and extracurricular activities, gender and sexual orientation are part of the lived daily realities of those who work and learn in U.S. public schools. (pp. 115-116)
Gender roles also guide society’s expectations for behaviors, personality traits, attitudes, leadership styles, and conflict resolution that are considered socially acceptable and are valued in women and men (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Lugg, 2003; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012). Essentially, the leadership qualities generally associated with the superintendent’s role are incongruent with society’s stereotypical view of women (Hoyt, 2007). Ryan (2012) hypothesized that since men historically dominated the superintendency, society’s expectations for the superintendent aligns with typical masculine behaviors. In addition, society, as a whole, views men in educational leadership positions more favorably than women (Ryan, 2012; Young, 2005). Young (2005) stated, “The norms and expectations in most schools and school districts ensure that women are less likely than men to serve in leadership positions” (p. 33). In a meta-analysis of over 15,000 dissertations, Nelli (2014) reported “educational leadership, intellectual authority, and eminence” were more often associated with males (p. 99) indicating that gender stereotypes even existed in scholarly research.

Bell (1988) discussed the impact of gender stereotypes with regard to the superintendency:

Given a general cultural preference for male leaders in our society, the tradition of male leadership in schools, and the predominantly male membership of school boards, the most persuasive characteristic a candidate for superintendent could possess seems to be maleness. Maleness signifies to board members shared language and experiences, predictability, connection with the power structure, and leadership that satisfies stereotyped preferences. (p. 50)
Ironically, girls, as students, are typically much more engaged in schooling, generally make better grades and embrace school life more than males (Ostos, 2012); therefore, women’s interest in seeking the superintendency should seem normal and expected.

Numerous studies reported that female superintendents regularly experience gender stereotyping or discrimination (Coleman, 2012; Grogan, 2008; Mendez-Morse, 1998, 2004). Women who serve in leadership roles such as the superintendency, however, are more successful when they do not attempt to emulate a “gender-neutral” (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011, p. 113) role, meaning that in order to be successful as female leaders, women should present themselves in a manner that society associates with the stereotypical role of a female. For example, when Hilary Clinton was running for the U.S. Senate seat, the fact that she approached the subject of policymaking and politics, typically associated with men, was considered to represent “very un-First Ladylike gendered behavior” (Lugg, 2003, p. 115) and resulted in Clinton receiving harsh and degrading verbal attacks (Lugg, 2003). In general, when in positions of leadership, women who attempt to lead in the same manner as men are generally unsuccessful (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011).

Women who self-promote often encounter significant gender biases. Society’s stereotypical view of women and men frowns upon women who advocate for themselves (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Fisk, 2014; Northhouse, 2007; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Whether they are promoting their strengths in seeking the position of superintendency, asking for a higher salary, or simply demonstrating assertiveness and confidence, society deems these types of behaviors as appropriate for men and not for women (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Fisk, 2014; Northhouse, 2007; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Women
and men who self-promote during the hiring process for the superintendency were typically perceived differently as well. For example, when men demonstrate these behaviors, stakeholders such as the school board, community, and school staff perceive them as strong, independent, and capable of making difficult decisions (Northouse, 2007). Women, on the other hand, who demonstrate these same behaviors are usually perceived by stakeholders as arrogant, bossy, and ultimately, less hirable (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Fisk, 2014; Northouse, 2007; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013).

Historically, female superintendents ignored society’s biased perception of the superintendency as a barrier (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Young & Skrla, 2003) and failed to acknowledge the existence of discrimination (Page-Hite, 2004). Page-Hite (2004) stated that when female superintendents in Mississippi were directly asked if they had been victims of discrimination or gender bias, all responded they had not, an example of the denial Rhode (2014) called the “no problem problem” (p. 6). However, as she continued to engage them in dialogue, each of the women acknowledged that they were, in fact, “victims of discrimination, sexism, and gender issues” (p. 65). More recent studies report female superintendents have begun to recognize and acknowledge these biased perceptions (Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2010; Ryan, 2012).

Pathway to the superintendency. Research also indicates another external barrier to the superintendency is women’s career pathway. The ascent to the top of school leadership is compared to a labyrinth (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011) because of the variety in the career paths of female superintendents. Mendez-Morse (1998) reported that some female superintendents followed non-traditional career paths. In her study of Mexican
American women’s ascension to the superintendency, she explained that one of the women began her career as a school secretary, became a teacher, assistant principal, a central office administrator, and a superintendent. Yet, another woman moved from the classroom into the principalship, skipping the traditional pathway through the assistant principal’s role, and then to superintendent. This transition reaffirms the comparison women’s career pathways to the superintendency as that of a labyrinth.

Lemasters and Roach (2012) also studied the career pathways of female superintendents and reported the majority of elementary school teachers were women, and when those women moved from the elementary classroom to administration, they typically moved into an elementary principalship. This pathway, however, does not typically lead to the superintendency and could even represent a barrier for women seeking the top school leadership role (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Lemasters & Roach, 2012). A more common pathway for women gaining access to the superintendency is service at the district or central office level as specialists or supervisors (McGrath, 1992). Page-Hite (2004) conducted a qualitative study specific to female superintendents in Mississippi. All six of the female superintendents who participated in the study reported they held central office positions in the same district prior to their selection as superintendent.

In a study of female superintendents in the tri-state region (Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida), Norwood (2005) found the most common path to the superintendency for these women was from the classroom, to a high school principalship, district administrator, and then to the position of superintendent. However, when advancing to the next step, McGrath (1992) stated regardless of their own professional experiences or
career path, women “must convince the existing leadership that she is capable of the stretch” (p. 62) from whatever previous experiences to the expectations of the superintendency.

**Political barriers.** Dealing with politics in the superintendency may also represent a barrier for women in the superintendency. Historically, conflict within the superintendency occurred as a result of organizational politics (Cuban, 1985; Grogan, 2000). Typically women are not attracted to the political aspects of the superintendency. Even though women can handle the political aspects of many situations, they often reported feeling less confident when they looked at the superintendency in a strictly political sense (Hill & Ragland, 1995). In addition, “Men act as gatekeepers, in which deals are often made and agreements cut before many women know positions are available” (Hill & Ragland, 1995, p. 11).

Gammill and Vaughn (2011) described an example of the overwhelming political barriers associated with the superintendency when a female superintendent received significant political backlash after firing a football coach. Public outcry and pressure from the school board resulted in the woman’s resignation. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), all superintendents must navigate through both political issues and problems related to power when negotiating the needs of the all stakeholders. All superintendents, both male and female, face challenges related to politics within the community. However, female superintendents may often confront a “tangled web of expectations and judgement” (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011, p. 115), and in some cases, these expectations and judgements result in barriers too large to overcome. The issue of merging gender and politics, with regard to the superintendency, has been somewhat
overlooked, especially considering the degree to which power and politics impacts the office of superintendent as a whole (Bjork, 2008; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011). Studies related to the interaction between gender and politics, with regard to female superintendents, consistently reported politics as a significant barrier for female superintendents (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan, 1999, 2003, 2008; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; McGrath, 1992; Young, 2005). As recent as 2012, Foster, Link and Scott reported that female superintendents themselves regarded political awareness as the most critical area of competence related to the superintendency.

*Inequity in pay.* Inequity in pay, a gender wage gap, for women in school leadership positions represents a barrier for many women, including female superintendents (Young, 2005). Even though women educators often have significantly more education and professional preparation than men, their salary does not necessarily reflect this advantage. In addition, many women advance to the superintendency with more years of experience, but are paid less than men with the same experience (Young, 2005). Research indicates that women’s commitment and expertise match that of men in the same positions. Yet, women are less likely to negotiate for a higher salary than men due to social risks such as being perceived as bossy, overbearing, and demanding (Northouse, 2007). In 1996, Gupton and Slick reported disparities in the pay of women compared to men in the exact same educational leadership roles. In a replication of their study, Morrison (2012) reported that almost 20 years later, women in educational leadership roles continue to receive less pay for the same jobs as their male colleagues.
Length of tenure. Many superintendents do not remain in the position for lengthy terms of service (Palladino et al., 2007). This represents an external barrier that negatively impacts both men and women. According to Lemasters and Roach (2012), female superintendents postpone career advancement due to parenting responsibilities, often resulting in women’s entry to the superintendency at a much later point in their careers than men. As a result, female superintendents’ tenure may be shorter than that of male superintendents. In addition, the literature reports that women often remain in the classroom longer than men before moving into any leadership position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). In 1992, the average age of Pennsylvania women moving into educational leadership positions was 49 (Gupton & Slick, 1996). By 2012, Morrison reported that women’s age in accessing educational leadership roles decreased to an average of 38, indicating that at least in some areas of the country, women may be gaining access to the superintendency earlier in their careers.

Even though women’s tenure in the superintendency is often shorter than men’s (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011), women typically enter this role with significantly more experience in education (Grogan, 2008; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011). In a study of Missouri superintendents, Foster et al. (2012) found that women “averaged more total years experience in Missouri, more total years experience in public schools in Missouri, and more years of experience in their current district than male superintendents” (p. 123). Yet, even with more years of overall experience in education, the tenure of female superintendents in Missouri, on average, remained less than men’s. Brunner and Grogan (2007) emphasized the importance of the tenure of
superintendents and noted that some progress had occurred in increasing female superintendents’ tenure:

Fifty-eight percent of male superintendents spent more than seven years in the position compared to 31% of women in the 2003 study, a 6% increase over the number of women who had spent the same amount of time in the 2000 study. This fact leads us to believe that longevity in the superintendency increases as it becomes more “normal” for women to be viewed as superintendents. (as cited in Foster, Link, & Scott, p. 34)

Historical Barriers

In addition to the internal and external barriers female superintendents face, the literature also includes explanations of barriers discussed in multiple studies over long periods of time. For the purposes of this study, historical barriers, such as the glass ceiling, the Good Ole Boys’ Club, and lack of mentoring, are those barriers that have been repeatedly discussed in the literature, relative to women in the superintendency.

Glass ceiling. Numerous researchers studying female superintendents referred to a glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that prevents women from moving into top leadership positions, such as women aspiring to the superintendency (Gammill & Vaughan, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; Northouse, 2007; Ryan, 2012; Wynn, 2014). The glass ceiling includes various types of barriers – “ranging from individual and interpersonal levels to organizational and societal levels” (Northouse, 2007, p. 283) that typically impede women’s progress to top-level leadership positions, such as the superintendency. According to Northouse (2007), “Understanding the glass ceiling will help to combat the inequality from many perspectives including individual, interpersonal,
organizational, and societal approaches” (p. 282). As with any barrier to advancement, acknowledging the existence of the barrier must occur first (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).

A review of the research over the past ten years regularly reported the glass ceiling as a barrier to women moving into top leadership roles such as the superintendency (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Northouse, 2007; Ryan, 2012; Wynn, 2014). Alison Wynn (2014) reported women who typically encountered barriers in moving upward into top leadership roles and were successful in these roles, were less likely to perceive that a glass ceiling existed. The women in Wynn’s study (2014) had connections to professional schools, graduate school programs, and other educational supports. However, women who encountered barriers due to structural factors such as “working long hours, being the family breadwinner, and having young children” (Wynn, 2014, p. 6), without support systems in place, were more likely to believe that the glass ceiling does, in fact, exist. The implications of this research, according to Wynn (2014) indicates a need for organizations to purposefully provide internal support systems to assist women with the structural demands of their lives while also providing promotion opportunities for women as well.

Women must also be taught to recognize and acknowledge that barriers exist, in order to develop strategies to overcome these structural barriers. According to Wynn (2014), “We can’t assume that anybody understands the basis of inequality. It has to be something that people are taught to see and understand, or else they may behave in a way that reproduces that very structure” (p. 6). In fact, “many contemporary scholars no longer seek to explain women’s under-representation at the highest levels of leadership in
relation to more traditional explanations such as the *glass ceiling* or *chilly climate*” (Wheat, 2013, p. 64). Instead, many current researchers reported that women, in general, stated that it is their own personal choices, with regard to balancing family and career, which prohibit them from moving into top leadership roles (Wheat, 2013). This explanation is an example of an external barrier evolving into more of an internal struggle within women themselves and the ongoing “no problem problem” (Rhode, 2014, p. 6).

*Good Ole Boys’ Club.* “The Good Ole Boys’ Club” (Hill & Ragland, 1995, p. 11), (also called the “Good Old Boys’ Network”) refers “to an invisible network of males and male dominated attitudes” (Ryan, 2012, p. 5) with the purpose of keeping women from “attaining certain social or professional positions” (Shakeshaft, 1999 as cited in Ryan, 2012, p. 5). According to Hill and Ragland, (1995), “The Good Ole Boys’ Network exists so strongly in many school districts that many men can tell you their number in line to the superintendency” (p. 11). In 1996, Gupton and Slick reported the findings of their study and stated that women in educational leadership identified the Good Ole Boys’ Club as the predominant barrier for gaining access to top leadership roles. In a replication of their 1996 study, roughly 80% of the female participants reported being a woman as their greatest obstacle in attaining a position in educational leadership (Morrison, 2012). In essence, roughly 25 years later, women report they are still fighting the Good Ole Boys’ Club.

Women who were successful in navigating to top leadership positions, such as the superintendency, in spite of the Good Ole Boys’ Club, often did so by “gaining access to membership in networks of influential men” (McGrath, 1992, p. 63) with the goal of being acknowledged as a part of their network. According to Hill and Ragland (1995),
“Men act as gatekeepers, in which deals are often made and agreements cut before many women know positions are available” (p. 11). In addition to gatekeepers’ presence within school districts (Coleman, 2012), the existence of “community gatekeepers” (Lemasters & Roach, 2012, p. 4) adds another source of exclusion. For example, in many cases, most school board members are made up of mostly male members. As a result, men who socialize at the golf course or other common male-dominated events naturally acquire greater access to these male school board members. These types of social connections facilitate relationship building that, in turn, often affords men the advantage over women (McGrath, 1992), keeping the Good Ole Boys’ Club phenomenon alive and well.

_Lack of mentoring opportunities._ Many researchers stated that female superintendents receive inadequate professional development and mentoring opportunities, leaving them at a disadvantage during both the initial stages of their superintendency and beyond (Grogan, 2005; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2010; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012). Ryan (2012) emphasized, “It is not always just what you know but who you know as well” (p. 128). In addition, she advised female superintendents to “create a cocoon of positive and influential masters of the craft who can assist you personally and professionally” (Ryan, 2012, p. 128).

Female superintendents welcomed both informal and formal mentoring opportunities. Informal mentoring practices, provided by either male or female mentors, proved to be valuable to female superintendents (Perkins, 2014; Ryan, 2012). For example, when mentors had the opportunity to observe female superintendents _in action_, on the job, the mentors were readily available to provide authentic, immediate feedback.
Female superintendents stated that observing their mentors utilizing effective leadership strategies also positively impacted their own practice. Reflective dialogue engaged the women in discourse related to leadership strategies, decision-making, and general topics of concern. Supportive discourse served two purposes; first, to offer support to the woman, with the mentor acknowledging and celebrating her work and second, to communicate positive comments to others about the woman superintendent. For example, the mentor may use a school board meeting to publicly praise the mentee, the female superintendent (Perkins, 2014). In this case, the mentor holds a kind of “gatekeeper power” (Perkins, 2014, p. 111). In other words, depending upon what the mentor actually communicates to others, the mentor essentially holds the power to deny or allow entrance to other opportunities, acceptance, and so on (Perkins, 2014).

According to Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010), “Mentoring is a common practice for the advancement of men” (p. 3) but not for women. Because of the disproportionate representation of men in the superintendency, there are few women available to provide guidance as mentors to other women (Grogan, 2005). Therefore, with the majority of men serving as mentors to female superintendents, “Male superintendents have a significant responsibility to contribute to equity by actively deconstructing images of women as inferior leaders and to further deconstruct any essentialist view of others and the categories in which they are placed, such as women” (Perkins, 2014, p. 167).

Citing mentoring as critical to female superintendents’ success, researchers stated that mentors also offer guidance regarding career-related decisions including potential career moves (Berman, 1999; Norwood, 2005; Ostos, 2012). In addition, female
superintendents whose mentor was a seasoned female superintendent helped them to learn the challenges associated with the position. Also, Gupton and Slick (1996) reported that mentors provide support and guidance as the women move forward into their term of service. Women serving as superintendents in a successful Mississippi school district also stated that the presence of mentors provided support for their professional lives (Page-Hite, 2004).

Recently, mentoring women in leadership roles resulted in off-site professional development opportunities. For example, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), an organization that provides extensive professional development for educators, offers leadership trainings specifically for women in top educational leadership roles (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). Other reported mentoring opportunities include female superintendents observing their mentors in action. Participating in mentoring programs, such as these, provides women valuable learning opportunities and also helps women in leadership positions network with colleagues (Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2010).

The literature also includes various reasons for why female superintendents lack mentors in assisting with their professional growth. For example, men often fail to mentor women toward career advancement opportunities due to a perceived lack of women’s interest. Risking the possible misperception in a male/female mentor relationship deters other mentoring opportunities as well. In many cases, women either do not recognize the value of mentoring opportunities or simply lack the time. Inadequate mentoring opportunities often results in many women feeling that being a woman in a leadership role is one of isolation and that they are “the only one” (Hill & Ragland, 1995,
The lack of mentoring and professional growth opportunities represents an ongoing challenge for women in the superintendency.

**Dispositions and Traits of Female Superintendents**

I synthesized the literature relating to the dispositions and traits of female superintendents, and themes emerged describing common characteristics and qualities. The literature review is presented under each of the emergent themes. The themes include sources of inspiration, early experiences, and values.

**Sources of inspiration.** Many female superintendents reported their families served as key contributors in inspiring them to seek a leadership position. Several studies reported most female superintendents were first-born children in their families (Frasher, Frasher, & Hardwick, 1982; Norwood, 2005; Pavan, 1999). Typically, first-born children exhibit an independent personality, are encouraged to be risk-takers, and demonstrate self-reliance (Frasher et al., 1982; Henning & Jardim, 1977), behaviors associated with leadership. Female superintendents also reported having mothers and fathers with high expectations for success (Jackson, 1999; Pavan, 1999). Many of these women credited their families with instilling in them both commitment and perseverance when faced with adversity (Beard, 2012; Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones, 2010). Female superintendents also reported receiving inspiration from other female role models who were pioneers for women in leadership positions. Specifically, Hilary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, and Sandra Day O’Connor inspired some women to “seek career growth, goal attainment, and self-confidence” (Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones, 2010, p. 6).
Values. The literature revealed that female superintendents possess a number of common beliefs and values that define their leadership experiences. For example, female superintendents reported that commitment and perseverance guide their practice on a daily basis. One superintendent stated that her own son died four days after she stepped into the superintendency role, and she used her experience with this tragic loss to keep her work in perspective (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). Female superintendents discussed ethics and morality as drivers for decision-making (Beard, 2012; Palladino et al., 2007), indicating that lessons previously learned in their lives provided direction and guidance in their work as superintendents. Female superintendents also exhibited determination and a strong work ethic (Page-Hite, 2004).

Practices of Female Superintendents

The literature review revealed several over-arching themes relating to common practices associated with female superintendents. These themes include leadership practices, along with practices associated with instructional leadership.

Leadership practices. To summarize the contrast between the typical leadership styles of female superintendents compared to that of males, Ostos (2012) described both transformational and transactional leadership approaches (Burns, 2003). According to Ostos (2012), women typically exhibit transformational leadership practices. In doing so, their leadership objectives focus upon efforts to transform the overall organization, the school district, by inspiring and nurturing their followers, serving as a role model, and gaining trust from subordinates, with an intent to transform the organization, including themselves (Burns, 2003; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003; Ostos, 2012). Ostos (2012) also recommended that leaders of 21st century schools, whether
male or female, embrace a transformational leadership approach. However, in general, this approach typically reflects women’s natural leadership propensities (Ostos, 2012).

In contrast, while male superintendents display some transformational qualities, they typically lead in a more transactional manner where the goals of the organization are facilitated through transactions between the leader and subordinates (Ostos, 2012). This type of leader also communicates expectations and grants rewards or corrections, based on the actions of the subordinates. Men generally prefer to have more control of the organization and typically provide less communication to the individuals within their organizations (Hoyt, 2007; Ostos, 2012).

The literature revealed that male and female superintendents consistently demonstrate common practices relative to their style of leadership. Female superintendents ranked themselves as less motivated by power than their male colleagues (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Morrison, 2012), but they also reported they are perceived to be as powerful as men are on the job (Morrison, 2012). However, when female colleagues of female superintendents were asked to rank the female superintendents’ level of motivation by power, compared to men’s, colleagues reported that women are motivated by power (Morrison, 2012). Even though female superintendents stated they were not motivated by power, they ranked themselves equally as aggressive, competitive, and family-oriented as men, but higher than men in verbal skills, relationship building, and cooperativeness (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Morrison, 2012). Women also reported they are as “androgynous as their male colleagues and exhibit both masculine and feminine traits in equal proportion to their male counterparts” (Morrison, 2012, p. 128).
While some researchers reported that gender impacts leadership style very little or not at all (Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Van Engen, Vander Leeden, & Willemsen, 2001), the predominant view is that women’s leadership styles are more closely aligned to the needs of today’s educational systems (Helgeson, 1990; Rosener, 1995). Reeves (2006) stated that with the complexities of today’s schools, leaders of schools must embrace a collaborative approach; thus, indicating a need for today’s superintendents to adopt a more shared leadership style. This approach closely matches the leadership style of female superintendents who typically value stakeholders’ opinions and seek their input, resulting in a more inclusive culture (Helgesen, 1990). Hoyt (2007) reported that this more popular view of the kind of leadership most needed “extols the superiority of women in leadership positions” (p. 265).

With increasing demands in the U.S. public education systems, the 21st century superintendent must also possess skills to build relationships and to engage with all stakeholders. In doing so, today’s superintendents will demonstrate leadership and power from within the organization instead of the more traditional top-down approach. Reeves (2006) stressed that communication skills are critical for leaders in every organization. In other words, communication and relationships are closely intertwined; without one, the other is incomplete. According to Palladino et al., (2007):

The challenge of forming relationships with members of a highly pluralistic society in which we live is more difficult to meet today. Furthermore, it is understood that these demands must be met on top of all the other fundamental ones that are required to manage the fiscal and human resources of a school district. (p. 11)
Female superintendents also generally enact their leadership responsibilities with an overall relational focus. This focus, in turn, guides their vision for the organization, efforts to build capacity within the leadership and instructional staff, and attention to the individuals who make up their overall organization. According to Grogan and Brunner (2005), “women prefer to have power ‘in’ versus power ‘over’ other people because they value the power found in relationships” (as cited in Ostos, 2012, p. 28). Women typically prefer to connect with people and view themselves as leading from within the organization (Ostos, 2012).

Female superintendents identified both “inter- and intra-school relationships as the essential core of their resistance, success, commitment, and joy as superintendents” (Palladino et al., 2007, p. 43). (The intraschool relationships include those relationships developed with individuals affiliated directly with the school district, such as administrators, teachers, and students. In particular, female superintendents even seek out and communicate regularly with classroom teachers (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Of equal importance are the interschool relationships, which include stakeholders from within the community, such as ministers, business owners, law enforcement agencies, and so forth.) In fact, regardless of the topic, female superintendents regularly related their responses back to the relationships with stakeholders that helped them get the job as superintendent and to be successful, stating that the communication was at the foundation of the relationships (Grogan, 2008; McGrath, 1992; Palladino et al., 2007). The literature includes an abundance of evidence supporting female superintendents’ capacities for developing relationships and connections with stakeholders (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Page-Hite, 2004; Wheatley, 1992).
Just as female superintendents seek to create a more inclusive culture (Helgesen, 1990), they also “put more energy into creating a positive group effort” (Ryan, 2012, p. 123), where much of the work is done in collaborative teams. Grogan (2005) stated that all superintendents value stakeholders’ input into decision-making, but women actually invite it. Female leaders gauge their success based upon the work of the entire organization, the dynamics between the participants in the group, and the shared work of a team. In contrast, male leaders consider themselves successful based upon their own performance in displaying leader behaviors (Banks, 1995; Foster et al., 2012).

**Instructional leadership.** The literature emphasized the importance of the superintendent serving as the instructional leader of the school district (AASA, 2010; Bjork, 1993; Hord, 1993, Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Myers, 1992; Page-Hite, 2004). Marzano and Waters (2009) reported that a growing emphasis on accountability has placed more responsibility on both school boards and the superintendent in terms of student achievement; thus, the superintendents’ role has become significantly more involved in the instructional leadership of school districts. Female superintendents place more emphasis on the “well-being of children and families” (Grogan, 2005, p. 25), focus on the “whole child” (p. 25), and develop programs to address these needs. Both men and female superintendents stated that “knowledge of teaching and learning, and knowledge of curriculum are considered to be strengths for women” (Grogan, 2005, p. 25). Female superintendents also rank the importance of superintendents’ understanding of the changes in curriculum higher than their male colleagues (Grogan, 2005).

Male superintendents boast confidence in their skills related to management such as daily operating procedures, taking care of school facilities, and managing the school
district’s budget (Glass & Sclafani; 1988; McGrath, 1992). However, they readily admit needing to improve their skills in communication, curriculum, and instruction, and observing and evaluating teachers (Glass & Sclafani; 1988; McGrath, 1992).

In contrast, the areas identified as weaknesses for male superintendents were reported as strengths of female superintendents (McGrath, 1992). Because of the need for greater focus on instructional leadership, McGrath (1992) predicted more women would be appointed as superintendents in the decade ahead, “opening up tremendous career advancement opportunities to women in education and providing vital, new leadership needed to reform education in America” (p. 65). Other researchers also concluded that female superintendents’ work during their tenure was largely focused on curriculum, instruction, and student achievement (Grogan, 2008). Even though this was considered to be a strength in female superintendents’ leadership styles, some school boards, principals, teachers, and even communities resisted the superintendents’ focus on instruction, perceived it as micro-managing, and “too much, too fast” (Grogan, 2008, p. 652).

Coleman (2012) reported that women in top leadership positions regularly engage in reflective practice. In doing so, these women essentially provide their own professional development, as they consistently incorporate a “process of deeply structured self-reflection” (p. 603). This practice is associated with the development of an “ethical, authentic leadership” approach and is also referred to as gaining a “critical consciousness” (Capper et. al., 2006, as cited in Coleman, 2012, p. 603). Regularly engaging in self-reflection is supported in the literature as a means for establishing sound, professional practice (Coleman, 2012). In addition, this practice provides an opportunity
to clarify one’s own values, another indicator that women’s practices align closely to the demands of the 21st century superintendency (Hoyt, 2007).

Theoretical Analysis of Literature

Feminist theory is based on the assumption that women and men experience the world differently, and the task of the theory itself is to explain those differences (Flax, 1979). Within feminist postructuralism, discourse refers to a set of views and the way that individuals interpret the world (Barrett, 2005; Weedon, 1987, 1996). In addition, discourse describes the opposing views that various social institutions use to give meaning to their own world and to the world of others (Grogan, 1999; Weedon, 1987, 1996). Using the construct of discourse as a lens to analyze the internal, self-imposed barriers of female superintendents reveals that men and women are engaged in completely different discourses. The conflict that women experience, for example, with regard to the responsibilities of being a wife and mother, essentially results in two competing discourses—mother/wife versus superintendent/employee. In contrast, men’s experiences, as the breadwinner of the family, working long hours and spending less time at home, historically results in a discourse that honored and celebrated men’s long hours, hard work, and typically, his success (Hochschild, 1989).

Identifying the competing discourses of female superintendents, mother/wife versus superintendent/worker, does not reflect upon women’s actual performance as superintendents. The internal struggle for women, as wives and mothers, contributes to the ongoing conflict women experience as they strive to resolve the competing discourses. Male superintendents are likely to experience success and accolades for working long hours resulting in their absence from home. However, female
superintendents who demonstrate the same patterns of behavior, working long hours, are likely to be judged by society as negligent in terms of meeting their responsibilities as wives or mothers (Barrett, 2005; Grogan, 1999). Poststructuralists emphasize that, “People are subjects of cultural storylines” (Barrett, 2005, p. 83), and who we are is essentially constructed from our experiences.

**Application of Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory’s underlying purpose is to understand women’s unique experiences compared to those of men, including the “power differential between men and women” (Flax, 1979, p. 82). The underlying assumption of feminist theory is that the world has been structured in a manner that oppressed women, and feminist theory attempts to communicate how and why this occurred. This structure, called *patriarchy* by feminine theorists, assumes that men have “more power than women, and more access to whatever society esteems” (Flax, 1979, p. 82). The superintendency, for example, represents a patriarchal structure in that men have always outnumbered female superintendents, both nationally and in the state of Mississippi (AASA, 2000, 2010, 2013). According to feminist theory, this patriarchal structure affords male superintendents more power within our public education system, along with greater access to the superintendency role. Thus, the U.S. educational system, with regard to the highest leadership role, is representative of the patriarchal structure assumed by feminist theory.

From the inception of school administration in the United States during the mid-1800s, gender served as a divisive factor as male teachers sought administrative positions in order to distance themselves from teaching (Blount, 1998), which was considered
“woman’s work” (Lugg, 2003, p. 33). In contrast, women who attempted to seek administrative positions were “viewed as transgressing their gender-appropriate bounds, and thus, were stigmatized” (Blount, 1999, p. 13). As a result, men gained greater access and more power within the field of education, furthering the patriarchal nature of educational administration.

Historically, men received both public and political support to pursue the top leadership role in public education (Blount, 1998; Lugg, 2003). For example, the American School Board Journal (1946) used gender specific vocabulary and described the ideal superintendent as “the man, a former collegiate hero with a physique comparable to a Greek god, and the ultimate in manliness” (Kowalski et al., 2011, pp. 21-22). This description reflected the manner in which school boards took on the responsibility of grooming male administrators in order to ensure their success (Blount, 1998). In summary, feminist theory recognizes the stereotypical views of teaching as women’s work, the grooming of men toward leadership roles in education, and the exclusion of women from these opportunities as a part of the patriarchal structure of public education that resulted in men having more power and greater choices within the field of education.

In addition to recognizing the stereotypical views of women, an underlying purpose of feminist theory is to help women overcome oppression. According to Flax (1979), “Feminist theory is a commitment to change oppressive structures and to commit to abstract ideas with concrete problems for political action” (p. 82). One such structure is people’s stereotypical expectation for gender specific personality characteristics and leadership behaviors (McCabe, 2001). Those required of the typical superintendent align
more closely to those of men and are in contrast to the expected norms for women (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012). Based on feminist theory, the very nature of this conflict, then, both causes and exacerbates the ongoing underrepresentation and oppression of women relative to the superintendency.

Another prevailing purpose of feminist theory is to understand how women’s oppression has evolved over time. Specific to women in the superintendency, the number of female superintendents across the United States and within Mississippi increased at a very slow rate and remains significantly lower than that of men (AASA, 2000, 2010, 2013). In 2013, women represented 24% of the nation’s population of school superintendents (AASA, 2013). Mississippi’s statistics closely aligned with the national trend with female superintendents representing 23% of Mississippi’s 2014-2015 population of school superintendents (MDE, 2014a).

A review of the literature revealed several historical barriers to women attaining the position of superintendent. For the purposes of this study, historical barriers are those barriers that were identified and discussed within the literature for decades and are still considered obstacles (or oppressive structures) to women seeking the superintendency. For example, the existence of the glass ceiling, a phenomenon historically acknowledged as a barrier for women attempting to move upward into top leadership roles (Northouse, 2007), continues to represent a barrier for women seeking the superintendency. Wynn (2014) stated that women who successfully advance into higher leadership roles are less likely to perceive that a glass ceiling exists, indicating that women may be making progress in upward movement in the job market.
In addition to the *glass ceiling*, another historical barrier widely discussed in the literature is known as the *Good Ole Boys’ Club*. The primary purpose of the Good Ole Boys’ Club (Shakeshaft, 1999; Ryan, 2012) is to keep women from upward movement into leadership roles. Using feminist theory as the rationale for comparing women’s oppression over time, Morrison’s (2012) study, a replication of Gupton and Slick’s (1996) research, provides an opportunity to directly compare women’s perceptions regarding access to top educational leadership roles. In 2012, roughly 80% of the women reported gender as their greatest barrier to upward movement in leadership positions (Morrison, 2012). As late as 2012, women seeking access to leadership positions in education cited the Good Ole Boy’s Club as one of the greatest barriers (Morrison, 2012), affirming the continued presence of oppressive structures impacting women’s opportunities to the superintendency, extending the patriarchal nature of the top leadership role in our country’s public education system.

*Application of Feminist Poststructuralism*

Feminist poststructuralists assume that oppression is simply the way that the world is organized (Dressman, 2008; Foucault, 1983) and strive “to understand how power relations work between individuals constructed through social, institutional, and political structures” (Aston et al., 2011, p. 1187). In addition, they question all aspects of the manner in which reality is constructed, believing that reality is influenced by various political and social factors. According to feminist poststructuralists, a woman’s personhood or gender is a social construction and a direct result of her background experiences, “relationships, and contextual meanings of relations of power between individuals” (Aston et al., 2011, p. 1188). Viewing through the lens of, “How do we
know what we know?" (Razack, 1995, p. 95, as cited in Barrett, 2005), feminist postructuralists attempt to comprehend how women have come to understand themselves and then question whether these understandings are authentic and represent reality (Barrett, 2005). This literature review explores discourse analysis and power relationships related to the underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi.

Discourse. Poststructuralists describe discourse as a set of principles and views, resulting from daily practices that form individual’s or group’s perspectives and impact understanding of their own interactions within the world (Barrett, 2005; Weedon, 1996). Within feminist poststructuralism, discourse does not refer specifically to oral nor written language, as is typically associated with this concept. Instead, feminist poststructuralists relate discourse to an individual’s identity, such as how the discourses of a woman superintendent, mother, and/or wife function, where they are found, how the discourses are produced and developed, and ultimately, the social impact of the beliefs associated with the discourse (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Barrett, 2005). Based on feminist poststructuralism, both women and men are associated with multiple, competing discourses.

Women who are mothers and/or wives typically take on one discourse related to expectations associated with traditional female roles (Rhode, 2014). In this role, women oversee the responsibilities associated with taking care of the children, household tasks, cooking, cleaning, shopping for groceries, assisting children with homework, and coordinating before and after-school activity schedules (including transportation to and from the activities). Within this discourse, women demonstrate their understanding of the world as nurturers, care-takers, and spouses (Rhode, 2014; Sandburg, 2013).
Responsibilities for women within the discourse of wife and mother frequently create stress if they interact with other discourses such as that of the superintendency. This results in women experiencing feelings of inadequacy and questioning themselves as to whether they can even handle the added responsibilities of the superintendency (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hall, 1996; Norwood, 2005; Ostos, 2012; Rhode, 2014). In addition, women working within the discourse of superintendent will likely be driven by the numerous responsibilities, roles, and dispositions associated with this top leadership position, most of which have been historically defined by the opposing discourse of males in the superintendency (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003, McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012).

Men also encounter multiple discourses. Historically, it has been an expected and accepted practice that the superintendency consists of long hours and overwhelming responsibilities at work, attending evening events, and providing little support at home (Hochschild, 1989). Because men have overwhelmingly represented the office of the superintendent, men, in essence, created the stereotypical perception of the discourse of the superintendency. As a result, women who gained access to the superintendency have approached the superintendency within the currently male-established discourse.


When a discourse becomes “normal” and “natural”, it is difficult to think and act outside it. Within the rules of a discourse, it makes sense to say only certain things. Other statements and other ways of thinking remain unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility. (p. 485)
It is possible, however, for discourses to be altered when different questions are asked, resulting in a recalibration of previously held understandings, the discovery of other concepts, and the revision of information considered to be facts (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Hekman, 1990). Feminist poststructuralist theory, then, supports the possibility of women and men superintendents questioning and challenging current discourses (Adams St. Pierre, 2000).

Subjectivity and agency. Feminist poststructuralism provides opportunities for women and men superintendents to determine how each individual engages in “certain social and institutional discourses” (Aston et al., 2011, p. 1191). In order to address the research questions in this study, for example, it was critical to analyze how men and women in educational leadership develop their own ideas and beliefs. According to Weedon (1987), “Subjectivity in poststructuralism is the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of self and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). Possessing subjectivity enables both men and women to analyze and challenge the stereotypes and discourses associated with gender-related expectations within the superintendency.

Subjects essentially earn the status of agency; it is conferred on them. If people believe that the subject is constituted, then that individual has the ability to participate in political roles using one’s agency. This applies to female superintendents when interacting with male superintendents as they take into consideration their own personal histories, biases, and experiences. According to Aston et. al., (2011), “exploring and questioning how power relations are used within and between discourses is a form of deconstruction that may get to the heart of how certain knowledge, beliefs, and practices
become entrenched and hegemonic in society” (p. 1191). This process may ultimately lead to how men develop certain “truths” about women in leadership and how these beliefs can be challenged.

Subjectivity and agency take into account the “practices and experiences” (Aston et al., 2011, p. 1191) of both male and female superintendents and consider the degree to which previous experiences impact their own perceptions. Both men and women, as inhabitants of their own gender-bound discourses, must participate in opportunities to view the discourse of the opposite gender. Application of subjectivity toward the other’s existing discourse, possibly through a mentoring relationship, may offer both men and women insights into their own internal and external stereotyped behaviors and beliefs.

Language. Poststructuralists, in general, claim that language does not necessarily convey the actual reality of the world (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Barrett, 2005). In isolation, words are essentially meaningless. Meaning occurs within the context of everyday events. According to Barrett (2005), “Language is productive and shapes our understandings of ourselves, others, and what is or is not possible” (p. 81). Gough (1991) reported, “Through the language we use, we create fictions every day, often presenting them as reality – the reality that is comfortable for us, or that we wish to live” (as cited in Barrett, 2005, p. 81).

The language female and male superintendents use is often reflective of their own individual beliefs and/or biases related to women advancing to higher positions of leadership (Aston et al., 2011). Sandburg (2013) reported that women consistently receive negative messages related to their ability to serve in top leadership roles and as a wife and a mother. Further, she states that women frequently internalize these negative
messages, resulting in less women aspiring to top leadership roles such as the superintendency. In addition, female superintendents often deny the existence of biased language. Women’s lack of acknowledgement of gender-biased language, along with the absence of language that encourages, supports, or promotes women in leadership roles is an example of both self-imposed and external barriers (Page-Hite, 2004). Feminist postructuralists posit that women’s own use of language can garner support or create negativism (Lugg, 2003; Northouse, 2007).

Application of Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory allows researchers to investigate and report from the specific standpoint of the disadvantaged (Wahyuni, 2012). In this study, female superintendents’ continuing underrepresentation placed them into the standpoint of the disadvantaged. According to Hekman (1997), feminist standpoint theory was shaped by two truths, “that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (p. 342). Wood (2009) reported that feminist standpoint theory “calls attention to the knowledge that arises from conditions and experiences that are common to girls and women” (p. 1).

Feminist standpoint theorists believe there are unequal power relations that guide our society resulting in one group of people representing the dominant group and others as the subordinate group. In this research study, male superintendents represented the dominant group of interest, and female superintendents represented the subordinate group. Based on feminist standpoint theory, women and men “are expected to engage in different activities” (Wood, 2009, p. 2), with women expected to be responsible for “homemaking, parenting, and kin keeping, and females are expected to defer to and
please others” (Wood, 2009, p. 2). In addition, feminist standpoint theorists state that women’s propensity for mothering and caretaking occur as a result of performing these duties regularly, increasing their competence in these duties (Wood, 2009), not simply because women are naturally born with the propensity for these responsibilities.

Feminist standpoint theory is also “unapologetically political because it aims to identify and challenge established social hierarchies and their consequences” (Wood, 2009, p. 2). Essentially, women’s lives provide a standpoint, “a privileged vantage point on male supremacy” (Hekman, 1997, p. 344). Based on feminist standpoint theory, however, men are unable to grasp women’s realities, resulting in a complete disconnect in how the ruling class typically defines reality (Hekman, 1997). By the same token, women, as the oppressed, typically fully grasp the “concrete reality” (Hekman, 1997, p. 346) of their own lives. Citing women’s standpoint with regard to responsibilities associated with motherhood and being a wife as significant barriers, Norwood (2005) stated that female superintendents reported waiting until their own children were older before pursuing the superintendency. In addition, many women indicated that they even chose to remain single and childless in order to allow them the freedom from typical mothering responsibilities in order to pursue the superintendency (Coleman, 2000; Ostos, 2012).

Using feminist standpoint theory as a lens for analyzing the historical barrier known as the glass ceiling offers a comprehensive view of the current status of its existence. For example, women who moved upward into top leadership roles within the past ten years, reported that the glass ceiling no longer existed (Wynn, 2014). These women represented the standpoint of graduates from various professional and graduate
school programs. However, women reporting from the standpoint of the family breadwinner reported that the glass ceiling did, in fact, remain, as a barrier for upward mobility (Wynn, 2014). In addition, these same women reported that long hours, being the sole money source for the family, and having small children created significant barriers. Therefore, application of the feminist standpoint theory may result in the individual standpoint of women changing and evolving depending upon other factors.

The application of feminist standpoint theory also revealed common themes within the literature related to women’s dispositions, attitudes, and practices. For example, one woman superintendent reported that the death of her own son provided a standpoint of survivor and strength that allowed her to keep her work as superintendent in perspective (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). Women’s standpoint within the family unit, as wife and mother, forced women to develop a level of stamina that ultimately prepared them to meet the work-related demands of the superintendency and the responsibilities associated with caring for children and a husband (Page-Hite, 2004). This same standpoint, specifically the standpoint of a mother, furthered the development of women’s natural propensity toward working with children, building relationships, communicating with stakeholders, and nurturing shared leaderships (Gilligan, 1993; Grogan, 2005, 2008; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Helgeson, 1990; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Page-Hite, 2004; Palladino et al., 2007).

Using the standpoint of a teacher also provides a lens through which female superintendents cultivated the effectiveness of their own instructional leadership, a quality that many male superintendents may lack, especially those who move into administration early in their careers (AASA, 2010; Bjork, 1993; Grogan, 2005, 2008;
Hord, 1993; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Myers, 1992; Page-Hite, 2004).

Reviewing the literature through the lens of the feminist standpoint theory, then, provides a deeper understanding of the perceived barriers that have impacted female superintendents’ personal and professional lives. Also, applying the feminist standpoint theory to the literature related to the dispositions, attitudes, and practices of female superintendents revealed women’s propensity for overcoming adversity, developing relationships, nurturing others, and demonstrating instructional expertise as standpoints, empowering women to serve in the male-dominated position of the school superintendency.

Gender Inequity in Educational Leadership - The Sounds of Silence

Gender consciousness refers to an awareness of how gender shapes the attitudes, lives, and opportunities of men and women differently (Gurin, 1985; Nelli, 2014). Rhode (2014) stated that the movement for gender equity in leadership roles in the United States is currently stalled. In fact, the attention women demanded in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s for equal rights has declined so much that the general public does not even recognize that gender equity still exists as a significant problem, creating a lack of gender consciousness throughout the United States (Nelli, 2014) and a silence in terms of how to address this problem. Rhode (2014) called this phenomenon, “the no problem problem” (p. 6).

A review of the literature related to women in the superintendency reflected an abundance of studies conducted in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Gradually, there was less focus related to efforts to achieve equity with regard to gender in U.S. public schools. In
addition, the available literature failed to bring forth new or additional approaches to addressing the ongoing underrepresentation of women in the superintendency across the United States. In most cases, the research simply repeated findings of previously conducted studies with regard to barriers for women in moving up the leadership ladder to the superintendency. For example, the findings of Morrison’s (2012) study essentially mirrored those of Gupton and Slick’s (1996) study. Research continually reported the same findings and failed to provide new or additional solutions to the ongoing problem.

As part of my research for this study, two broad areas of interest relative to the “no problem problem” (Rhode, 2014, p. 6) emerged. First, gender consciousness in educational leadership academic programs of study is sparse in colleges across the United States. Second, male theorists wrote most of the theories used to analyze literature related to the marginalization of women in the U.S.

Absence of Gender Consciousness in Educational Leadership Programs in Academic Institutions

Gender consciousness serves a critical role in the preparation of future educational leaders (Nelli, 2014; Rusch, 2004). In a review of the literature, however, the topic of gender equity was typically included within a “broad social justice umbrella” (Nelli, 2014, p. 15), sending the message that gender consciousness is not a priority within the overall content of educational leadership programs. Marshall (2004, as cited in Nelli, 2014) stated, “Educational leadership preparation programs have a legacy of tokenism towards equity issues” (p. 17) and further cautioned that simply mentioning gender equity within other course content cannot be expected to develop an adequate
level of gender consciousness as a legitimate, deliberate approach to address the topic of
gender equity (Nelli, 2014; Rusch, 2004).

Doctoral students, in particular, should be provided multiple opportunities for
research and discussions related to gender equity because this is often when these
students develop their own values (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Nelli,
2014; Rusch, 2004). Not providing opportunities for future educational leaders to discuss,
study, and debate issues related to gender equity sends a message that there is no
problem, just as Nelli (2014, p. 19) cited, “the ‘no problem’ problem.” Failure to
acknowledge the significance of gender equity within departments of educational
leadership further exacerbates the ongoing problem (Nelli, 2014).

In addition, discriminatory, biased beliefs of those who lead the academic
programs in higher education may also impact the never-ending cycle of gender inequity
in education (Nelli, 2014; Rusch, 2004). For example, Dr. Lawrence Summers, former
President of Harvard University, publicly blamed women’s underrepresentation in the
sciences on the fact that women are generally intellectually inferior and unmotivated to
engage in the scholarly activity required to succeed (Bombardieri, 2005; Nelli, 2014).
According to Nelli (2014), “When discriminatory public comments such as these are
made by a university administrator and educational leader from a prominent
postsecondary educational institution, it gives cause to examine gendered academic
socialization practices” (p. 18).

Numerous studies report that graduate students in educational leadership
programs perceive the topic of gender equity as unwelcome with state and local political
agencies, including the local school board (Cochrane-Smith, 1995; Lipman, 1998;
Mabokela & Madsen, 2003; Nelli, 2014; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Rusch, 2004). Both men and women state that their educational leadership programs included very little information related to understanding gender consciousness (Iselt, Brown, & Irby, 2001; Nellie, 2014). In a study of over 4,000 doctoral students in 11 disciplines, 74.2% of the participants indicated an interest in developing diversity within educational environments inclusive of both male and female (Golde & Dore, 2004; Nelli, 2014). However, only 28% of these students reported that their graduate program had adequately prepared them to do so (Golde & Dore, 2004; Nelli, 2014).

In addition, the topic of gender is significantly underrepresented in dissertation studies in colleges of education within the educational leadership programs of study (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; McGee Banks, 2000; Nelli, 2014; Rapp, 2001; Rusch, 2004). Out of over 15,000 dissertations completed between 1998 and 2007, from within the colleges of education in institutions across the United States, only 7.9% included any examination of gender. The absence of any topic within scholarly research sends a strong message as to the degree of importance of that particular concept or topic. Likewise, the frequency of a concept or topic within research also communicates its priority, emphasis, and commitment within that particular field of study (Krippendorf, 2004; Nelli, 2014). Nelli (2014) emphasized the importance of the dissertation process as “a key component of educational leadership academic literature” (p. 95) and further stated that the significant underrepresentation in the academic literature “gives cause for alarm” (p. 95). This also forecasts the likelihood of inadequate gender consciousness and commitment of future educational leaders. Further, these results implied a “low group cultural consciousness and commitment to gender issues” (Nelli, 2014, p. 96) gained from the
academic institutions. In other words, if our universities fail to promote an education that contributes to future educational leaders’ gender consciousness, it is unlikely that the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership roles, such as the superintendency, will significantly change.

Gender Inequity in Leadership Theory

In addition to inadequate attention related to gender consciousness within our nation’s colleges of education, leadership theories are often dominated by those primarily applicable to men (Brown & Irby, 1994; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007). Other researchers (Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2002; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft; 1986) addressed this issue and called for theories more inclusive of both male and female. Even though the majority of students in educational leadership programs are women, this cry for gender equity in the development of leadership theory was largely ignored for over 20 years (Irby et al., 2002). Irby et al. (2002) reviewed 24 leadership theories resulting in the following generalizations:

- Women’s experiences were excluded from leadership models with men being represented as “great men” (Irby et al., 2002, p. 304).
- Theory development mirrored leadership in the corporate world with leadership positions exclusively held by men (Irby et al., 2002; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007).
- Companies employing primarily men sponsored many research studies, resulting in male-dominated leadership theory (General Electric, Exxon, Xerox corporations) (Irby, et al., 2002).
• Definitions of the theories included sexist language in defining leadership. For example, the leaders were referred to as “he”, “his”, and so on (Irby et al., 2002, p. 305).

• Women were not expected to have the same careers as men. If they did hold a position typically held by men, they were then expected to act and achieve just as the men did (Irby, et al., 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

• The theories themselves were not democratic simply because only one gender was represented in the development of the theories (Irby et al., 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

• Some theories stated the need for “a participative, democratic, employee-friendly, and consensus-building approach to leadership” (Irby et al., 2002, p. 305). However, when these attributes were absent from a leadership model, the absence of women leaders was ignored (Irby et al., 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

• Even though women’s experiences were not included in the sample population, the theories were still generalized to both males and females.

In essence, the “conceptualization of leadership theory” (Irby et al., 2002, p. 306) grew from men’s experiences in leadership and generally ignored the experiences of women. However, the theories are still applied to leadership research, involving male and/or female leaders, and ignore the manner in which women interact with leadership (Irby et al., 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

Since the purpose of leadership theory is to inform the actions of educators, it is critical that theories are gender-inclusive and serve as a guide for both male and female leaders. Gender consciousness in leadership theory is essential in order to address the
current realities of schools in today’s society (Irby, Brown, & Trautman, 1999, as cited in Irby et al., 2002). Grogan (1998) emphasized the importance of considering gender in the development of leadership theory and stated, “It is reasonable that because women’s lived experiences as leaders differ from men’s, new theoretical understanding of a leadership that is premised on social justice might emerge” (p. 533). Only when women engage in theory development and application of these theories will women’s voices, as leaders, truly be heard (Grogan, 1998).

Recently, a more comprehensive, inclusive leadership theory, the synergistic leadership theory (SLT), was introduced (Irby et al., 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007). In contrast to previous leadership theories, the SLT theory is more complex, relational, and interactive. SLT is an example of theory that may be applied to both male and female leaders and focuses upon the interaction and interrelatedness of leadership behaviors, the structure of the organization, “external forces, and attitudes, beliefs, and values” (Irby et al., 2002, p. 312).

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of female superintendents in Mississippi, along with perceived practices, dispositions, and attitudes. Even though the synergistic leadership theory offers a more complex and thorough analysis of women as leaders, my intention for this study was not focused solely upon women as superintendents or leaders. Instead, it was my goal to understand how gender impacted each of these women’s lives as they served as superintendents. For this reason, this research study was framed within feminist theory, along with feminist postructuralism, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks.
Summary

In order to investigate the continuing underrepresentation of women in the superintendency in Mississippi, I focused on understanding the women’s perceptions related to their experiences, dispositions, practices, and attitudes as female superintendents in Mississippi. This study was framed within feminist theory, feminist poststructuralism, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks. An overview of each of these theories related to this specific research study included a brief review of the evolution of feminist theory in the United States, noting that the general purpose of feminist theory is to provide an explanation of the patriarchal nature of men’s power over women (Flax, 1979; Grogan, 2008). Within feminist poststructuralism theory, the constructs of language and discourse, subject and subjectivity, and power were reviewed in terms of how these constructs impacted female superintendents’ experiences. In addition, feminist standpoint theory was used to explore the power relative to the sexual division of labor (Sprague, 2005).

Historically, women’s early opportunities for education dates back to the 1700s, with the sole purpose of enabling women to study the Bible (Schwager, 1987). Pioneers of the early education movement for women, such as Sarah Pierce, Catharine Beecher, Emma Willard, and Mary Lyon, were instrumental in establishing educational opportunities for women in the United States (Blount, 1998; Schwager, 1987). Even as early as the Civil War, gender became a divisive factor within the field of education as men moved into administrative positions, and women remained as teachers (Blount, 1998).
Initially, the office of the superintendency was created to monitor 16th section land (Blount, 1998; Carter & Cunningham, 1997), but it evolved into multiple roles such as teacher/scholar, business manager, and statesman (Kowalski, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011; Schneider, 1994) with much of their focus on fiscal affairs, management of school facilities, strategic planning (Grogan, 2000), and a portrayal of the model superintendent as being male (Kowalski, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011). Therefore, women’s opportunities for serving as superintendents were marginalized, resulting in few women gaining access to the superintendency (Blount, 1988; Schwager, 1987). Also, with the implementation of the standards-based movement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the NPBEA and the ISLLC outlined specific standards and expectations for educational leaders of the 21st century, including superintendents, (Canole & Young, 2013). The newly adopted standards shifted the focus of the superintendent from a managerial role to that of an instructional leader (Canole & Young, 2013).

The review of literature reveals both internal and external barriers for women attempting to gain access to the superintendency. Internal, or self-imposed barriers, include women’s apathy, self-imposed negative messages, and lack of motivation for seeking higher leadership positions, such as the superintendency (Gupton & Slick, 1996; McCabe, 2001; Ostos, 2012; Sandberg, 2013). In addition, women continue to hold most of the responsibility for both parenting and family commitments (Barrios, 2004; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Norwood, 2005; Ostos, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004), causing women to doubt their own abilities to serve in a demanding leadership role as the superintendency.
In addition to internal barriers for women striving to gain access to the superintendency, external barriers, such as stereotypes associated with what society expects and accepts as gender-appropriate behaviors, impact women’s opportunities to secure and successfully serve as superintendents (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Coleman, 2012; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan, 2008; Lugg, 2003; Mendez-Morse, 1998; Northouse, 2007; Page-Hite, 2004; Ryan, 2012; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Young & Skrla, 2003). Other external barriers include the pathway to the superintendency (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McGrath, 1992; Mendez-Morse, 1998; Page-Hite, 2004), political barriers (Bjork, 2008, as cited in Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Cuban, 1985, as cited in Grogan, 2000; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan, 1999, 2003, 2008; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Houston, 1996; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; McGrath, 1992; Young, 2005), inequity in pay (Morrison, 2012; Young, 2005), and length of tenure (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 2008; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, as cited in Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011; Gupton & Slick, 1998; Foster et al., 2012; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Morrison, 2012; Palladino et al., 2007).

Several barriers for women attempting to move into superintendents’ positions were repeatedly mentioned throughout the literature. For the purposes of this study, these barriers are referred to as historical barriers. For example, the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that prevents women from moving upward into top leadership positions such as the superintendency, represents a historical barrier (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; Northhouse, 2007; Rhode, 2014; Ryan, 2012; Wheat, 2013; Wynn, 2014). In addition, the Good Ole Boys’
Club is consistently named as a barrier for women attempting to gain access to male-dominated fields such as the superintendency (Coleman, 2012; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Ryan, 2012; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Shakeshaft as cited by Ryan, 2012, p. 5; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012). Lack of mentoring opportunities for women is also repeatedly identified as a barrier for women attempting to move into the highest level of leadership in school districts, the superintendency (Grogan, 2005; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2010; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Morrison, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Perkins, 2014; Ryan, 2012).

Literature related to the dispositions and traits of women who have successfully gained access to the superintendency reveals several themes. First, female superintendents report their families have a significant impact on their decision to seek a leadership position (Frasher et al., 1982; Norwood, 2005; Pavan, 1999). Secondly, the ability to build relationships and communicate effectively is another common theme associated with female superintendents (Beard, 2012; Frasher et al., 1982; Grogan, 2008; Helgeson, 1990; Henning & Jardim, 1977; Jackson, 1999; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2012; McGrath, 1992; Palladino et al., 2007; Pavan, 1999). In addition, common values such as commitment, perseverance, ethics, and morality guide the direction of the female superintendents’ work (Beard, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Palladino et al., 2007).

Additional review of the literature reveals that female superintendents consistently demonstrate a common leadership style (Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Helgeson, 1990; Morrison, 2012; Rosener, 1995; Van Engen et al., 2001). Also, Reeves (2006) recommends a more collaborative approach for leading today’s
schools. This type of leadership approach (collaborative) is reported to be one of female superintendents’ greatest strengths (Grogan, 2005; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Foster et al., 2012; Helgeson, 1990; Hoyt, 2007; Ostos, 2012; Ryan, 2012). In addition, female superintendents are reportedly strong instructional leaders (Coleman, 2012; Grogan, 2005, 2008; Hoyt, 2007; McGrath, 1992).

Application of feminist theory, feminist poststructuralism, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks provide an analysis of the role that gender plays in women’s opportunities to access the superintendency. The analysis of the literature and application of theory reveals that men and female superintendents engage in completely different discourses (Grogan, 1999; Hochschild, 1989), largely a result of the widely accepted patriarchal structure that has historically defined both accepted and expected roles of men and women (Blount, 1999; Flax, 1979; Lugg, 2003). In addition, application of feminist standpoint theory to the literature provides a deeper understanding of the perceived barriers that previously impacted female superintendents’ personal and professional lives.

The literature also reveals that the topic of gender consciousness is typically overlooked in the preparation of future educational leaders (Nelli, 2014). Instead, this topic generally falls under the “broad social justice umbrella” (Nelli, 2014, p. 15) and often does not include students from educational leadership graduate programs. The fact that this topic is avoided is of concern, mirroring precisely what Rhode (2014) called the “no problem problem” (p. 19). The topics of gender consciousness and gender equity are also underrepresented in dissertation studies in colleges of education throughout the United States (Nelli, 2014). In addition, male theorists contribute the majority of the
current theories applied to leadership (Brown & Irby, 1994; Shakeshaft & Nowell, 1984), even when applying the theory to studies related to women.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This research study was conducted using qualitative inquiry. A basic interpretive design was used to investigate the phenomenon of disproportionately low numbers of women serving as superintendents in school districts throughout Mississippi. To that end, this chapter focused on the research processes used to conduct the study. Specifically, this section includes an explanation of the purpose of the study, research questions, overview of qualitative methodology and its applicability to this study, a description of the study sample, an overview of the interview questions used, procedures for collecting and analyzing the data, a timeline for the study, an explanation of procedures to establish trustworthiness, and the limitations of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the phenomenon of the small numbers of women serving as superintendents in Mississippi. Part of the study sought to understand the perceived barriers facing women who were serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi. A secondary purpose of this study was to understand the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women leading school districts in Mississippi. Developing a profile of these characteristics of female superintendents may provide direction for other women aspiring to serve in the top leadership role in school districts throughout Mississippi. The results of the study added to the current body of knowledge regarding women serving in the top leadership role within the K-12 public education setting in Mississippi.
Research Questions

The questions that guided this study were:

1. What were the perceptions of women who were serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting in Mississippi regarding barriers to the superintendency?

2. What were perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women who were serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi?

Design of the Study

In order to understand how female superintendents in Mississippi perceived barriers to the superintendency, this study employed a basic interpretive qualitative approach. Interpretivism relates the meaning and relevance of various social situations within specific contexts to the actual phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2002). The primary objective of this design, then, was gaining an understanding of the phenomenon within a particular research study (Mishler, 1979; Noblit & Eaker, 1987; Patton, 1980). In this study, the continuing low number of women serving as superintendents in Mississippi represented the phenomenon of interest. I applied the constructs associated with feminist theory, feminist post-structuralism, and feminist standpoint perspective in order to provide a deeper analysis of the data. In contrast to interpretivists’ primary emphasis on seeking understanding, feminist poststructuralists “question all aspects of the construction of reality, what it is and what it is not, how it is organized, and so on” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4) including political influences. The combination and integration of interpretivism, feminist theory, feminist post-structuralism, and feminist standpoint
inquiry applications, within the overall structure of qualitative design, provided a multilayered approach to the understandings revealed throughout this study.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described the qualitative researcher as one of multiple images, “scientist, naturalist, fieldworker, journalist, social critic, artist, performer, jazz musician, filmmaker, quilt maker, essayist” (p. 4). Likewise, the qualitative researcher acts as a bricoleur, a jack-of-all trades, and typically, a do-it-yourselfer (Levi-Strauss, 1966), constantly adapting throughout the entire research process (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). The qualitative researcher, as a bricoleur, determines the research practices based upon what information is of interest, with the questions evolving in response to the interactions with the research subjects within the context of the research setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Qualitative research often resembles a type of montage in that the research often emerges to represent new understandings, a new creation, not necessarily in a linear fashion, but simultaneously, weaving the data together, as whole, rather than isolated pieces of information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) compared the work of a qualitative researcher who uses montage to that of a quilt maker and stated, “The quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together. This process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5).

Qualitative research design allowed me, as the researcher, to approach this study as a bricoleur, using multiple sources of data to gather information, allowing the research process, along with the questions, to naturally unfold, resulting in a montage - a holistic representation of the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of women
serving as superintendents in Mississippi. The purpose of qualitative design is to inquire, ask questions, observe, explore a problem, and interpret the data as it is presented in its natural surroundings, with the intent of examining the constraints of everyday life (Creswell, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 1990). This desire to understand the problem at a “particular point in time and within a particular context” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2015, p. 16) is, in fact, one of the distinguishing characteristics of qualitative design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

According to Bogden and Biklen (1992, 2007), human behavior is largely impacted by the setting in which it occurs. Therefore, qualitative researchers typically prefer to travel to each participant’s natural setting to conduct the research. The researcher, then, is the primary instrument for data collection, and the actual setting serves as the “direct source of data” (Mendez-Morse, 1998, p. 57). Within the participants’ natural setting, the researcher will typically conduct observations and lead in-depth interviews as a means of data collection (Mendez-Morse, 1998). This allows the researcher to grow closer to each participant’s perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For this research study, I traveled to each of the female superintendents’ school districts (unless the female superintendent requested an alternate location) and conducted in-depth interviews in their natural surroundings, seeking to understand the continuing underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi. I served as the primary instrument for data collection, and the female superintendents and their school district sites (or the location of their choice) served as the primary data sources.

Qualitative researchers contend that individuals socially construct meaning and have their own perspectives as they interact with the world (Mendez-Morse, 1998;
Merriam, 2002). Seidman (2013) emphasized the value of qualitative data and its use of stories as data and stated, “Stories are a way of knowing” (p. 7). Listening to others’ stories provides a means of knowing and understanding individuals and their experiences. The use of qualitative methodology enabled me, as the researcher, to question, to listen, and ultimately, to hear and understand the stories of the female superintendents in Mississippi, with the ultimate goal of gaining an understanding of why there are so few women leading school districts in Mississippi. Furthermore, understanding the barriers facing current female superintendents in Mississippi offered further insight into the phenomenon of continuing low numbers of women who are serving as superintendents in Mississippi.

Reason (1981) questioned whether the process of interviewing and listening to people tell their “stories” (p. 7), is actually scientific. With regard to the excessive use of quantitative data in education, Seidman (2013) stated,

Little of it is based on studies involving the perspectives of the students, teachers, administrators, counselors, special subject teachers, nurses, psychologists, cafeteria workers, secretaries, crossing guards, bus drivers, parents, and school committee members, whose individual and collective experience constitutes schooling. (p. 9)

In essence, when using quantitative data, much of the story is left untold. For the current study, the low numbers of women serving as superintendents in Mississippi represented the central phenomenon. As I interviewed and observed each woman in her “natural surroundings,” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3) each of these women shared personal interpretations of her own experiences as a female superintendent in Mississippi.
The qualitative methodology enabled me, as the researcher, to question, listen, and ultimately, to hear and understand their stories, thereby offering an opportunity for their voices to be heard, both individually and collectively with the ultimate goal of gaining an understanding of why there are so few women leading school districts in Mississippi. In order to respond to the research questions, the participants’ perspectives, as female superintendents in Mississippi, were critical.

As the researcher, I served in the role of interviewer and as a “participant observer” (Creswell, 2015, p. 213). As a participant observer, I asked questions and interacted with each participant as I recorded the interview using a digital recorder. In addition, I also utilized field notes or “unstructured text data taken during observations” (Creswell, 2015, p. 212), recorded both during and after each interview. In order to remain fully engaged in the dialogue with each female superintendent throughout each interview, I recorded most of the field notes immediately following each interview.

Quantitative studies rely on statistics and numbers for determining outcomes of research. In qualitative inquiry, words, rather than numbers, represent the data. Qualitative researchers strive to “analyze the data with all its richness as closely as possible to the form in which they were recorded or transcribed” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 5). The analysis of data in a qualitative study is designed to understand people (Patton, 1990). It is an inductive process with the overall goal of understanding the central phenomenon. Data collection may include interviews, observations, and/or analysis of relevant documents. Following the data gathering process, analysis may take the form of themes, categories, proposed hypotheses, and even theory (Merriam, 2002). In this study, I analyzed data, (interviews, observations, field notes, reflexivity journal)
and searched for emerging themes and patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to understand the phenomenon of low numbers of female superintendents in Mississippi.

Using qualitative methodology allowed me, as the researcher, to delve into the stories and experiences of female superintendents in order to understand the phenomenon of so few women administering school districts in Mississippi. In addition, gaining an understanding of the barriers facing women who were serving as superintendents in Mississippi offered further insight into this phenomenon.

Selection of the Sample

Merriam (2002) emphasized the importance of purposive or purposeful sampling in determining who will be interviewed for the study with the goal of responding to the specific research questions. In purposeful sampling, the researcher intentionally selects specific individuals for the sample because these participants can best help us to learn or understand the central phenomenon in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). In order to gain an understanding of the central phenomenon, purposeful sampling is critical (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). In this study, participants were purposefully selected based on the criteria that they were female superintendents in the K-12 education setting in the state of Mississippi during the 2014-2015 school year. This sample selection technique allowed me to respond to the research questions.

A request to the Institutional Review Board at The University of Southern Mississippi was submitted outlining the proposed research study. Following notification of approval from the Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), I emailed all 34 women who were serving as superintendents in Mississippi to invite them to participate in the research study (Appendix B). Fourteen of the female superintendents responded
positively to the invitation to participate in the study. I made arrangements with 11 of the participants by phone or email, to travel to each of their offices within the school district and within the women’s natural setting in order to conduct the interviews. One superintendent was traveling and asked me to meet her at a local restaurant for the interview. I made arrangements to comply with her request and conducted the interview in the local Cracker Barrel. Two other female superintendents volunteered to participate, but we had several conflicts in our schedules, so I conducted these interviews by phone.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative researchers assert that detailed interviewing and observation allows a deeper understanding of each participant’s perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, I conducted a single, (approximately) one-hour, individual, and semi-structured interview with each of the female superintendents. Semi-structured interviews include a combination of structured and unstructured questions (Merriam, 2002). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed me to listen to the female superintendents’ responses and to delve deeper into their thoughts and feelings in order to respond to the research questions. I decided to conduct only one interview with each of the female superintendents for two reasons: respect for each of the women’s time and to encourage a larger number of women to participate in the study. The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device.

The qualitative approach allowed me to obtain open-ended narrative responses related to the women’s perceptions and experiences as superintendents in Mississippi. Before conducting each interview, I explained the study and read the Oral Presentation Guidelines (Appendix C). I also required each participant to read and sign the Informed
Consent Form (Appendix D) before beginning the interview. I asked questions as presented on the Interview Protocol (Appendix C). In designing the Interview Protocol (Appendix E), multiple sources were used in determining the questions that would be included. A combination of findings from previous research studies related to female superintendents’ experiences, along with research related to feminist theory, feminist post-structuralist theoretical framework, and feminist standpoint theoretical framework were used in creating the broad over-arching interview questions. The questions were included with the intent of guiding the content of each interview toward the research questions while also revealing whether female superintendents in Mississippi perceived the same internal, external, and historical barriers as were indicated in the literature. Some questions were also included to reveal the perceived dispositions, attitudes, and practices of the female superintendents. In general, the questions in the interview focused upon the following broad areas and were included with the intent of guiding the female superintendents’ responses toward the research questions:

1. Experiences related to attaining the position of superintendent
2. Experiences during their tenure as superintendents
3. Relationships and perceptions of various stakeholder groups of each of the female superintendents
4. Perceived advantages and disadvantages of being a female superintendent in Mississippi.

Following the completion of each interview, I emailed the digital audio file of each interview to a transcriptionist who transcribed each interview into textual data. The transcript for each interview was then emailed to me for review and approval. Following
my approval of each interview transcript, I then emailed it to the interviewee for a member check (Byrne, 2001), a process that uses the research participants as a means of checking to ensure the data is accurate.

Essentially, qualitative researchers begin the data analysis process as soon as the research process begins (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After receiving approval of the transcript from each female superintendent, I began the process of analyzing the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For each interview transcript, I unitized the textual data and coded it to identify common concepts. These concepts were then categorized into themes. Within the analysis of the data and the development of themes, I used the constructs associated with feminist, post-structuralism, and feminist standpoint theories to respond to the data and the research questions.

In contrast to quantitative research, which typically begins with a hypothesis to support or reject, qualitative researchers strive to unveil, explain, and comprehend the meaning of a situation from the perspective of the individuals participating in it (Mendez-Morse, 1998). In addition,

the qualitative research approach demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied. (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 5)

Therefore, capturing the meaning and the context of the recorded interviews is critical to the researcher’s work in a qualitative study (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Bogden and Biklen (2007) explained, “The digital recorder misses the sights, smells, impressions,
and extra remarks said before and after the interview” (p. 119). Thus, in addition to the data collected from the recorded interviews, I also used field notes and observation data for additional information. In general, field notes provide a written account of what the researcher observes, hears, experiences, and thinks throughout the entire process of a qualitative study (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). In order to provide focused attention toward each female superintendent during the actual interviews, I recorded the field notes immediately following each interview when I returned to an appropriate location that permitted my own independent reflection time. The content of the field notes depended upon the nature of the observations made during each of the interviews. In some cases, for example, the field notes included notes related to the female superintendent’s body language, whether she seemed distracted during the interview, whether a particular question seemed to make her uncomfortable, and other behaviors observed throughout the interview. After the recorded interview data was coded and analyzed to identify emergent themes, I reviewed the corresponding field notes to determine if any of the observation data impacted or offered deeper meaning to the interpretation of the interview data itself.

In addition, I also used a reflexivity journal as another source of data collection throughout the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on self, as the researcher, where the human represents the instrument. The reflexivity journal, then, is somewhat like a diary in which the researcher records both reflective and methodological entries throughout a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described writing as “not merely the transcribing of some reality. Rather, writing – of all the texts, notes, presentations, and
possibilities – is also a process of discovery of the subject (and sometimes of the problem itself) and discovery of the self” (p. 124). Reinharz (1997) emphasized that researchers bring themselves to the field and also create “the self in the field” (p. 3). As the researcher, I recorded both reflective and methodological entries in the journal to support the data collected in the recorded interviews with the female superintendents, as well as through observations and field notes. The combination of interviews, field notes, observations, and the reflexivity journal provided a comprehensive approach to collecting and analyzing the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative design, trustworthiness is defined as the ability to communicate to an audience that the results of the research are relevant and important (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riege, 2003; Yin, 1994). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

First, in order to ensure credibility of the study, the methods used should be “well established both in qualitative investigation in general and in information science in particular” (Shenton, 2003, p. 64). In this study, I used methodology supported by noted qualitative researchers. These methods included the use of semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2002) and analysis of data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In addition to utilizing reputable qualitative methodologies, I also used triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing to establish credibility of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that triangulation, the use of more than one data source,
improves the probability that the results and interpretations of the research will be deemed credible, thus, establishing trustworthiness of the findings. For this study, data sources included interviews with female superintendents in Mississippi, field notes, and the reflexivity journal.

Following the transcription of each interview, I also conducted member checks, a process that uses the research participants as a means of checking to ensure the data is accurate (Byrne, 2001). Finally, I used peer debriefing as a method of establishing trustworthiness. This process included ongoing dialogue sessions with my dissertation advisor with the purpose of “exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Because the researcher serves as the instrument in a qualitative research study, she must record any biases to avoid subjectivity and to ensure credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing provided me, as the researcher, an additional opportunity to reflect upon the data to ensure that my own biases were continually questioned. Utilizing credible qualitative methodologies, along with multiple sources of data, as well as member checking and peer debriefing, increased the credibility of the research findings, and therefore, contributed to establishing trustworthiness of the study.

Transferability

The very nature of qualitative research is such that it is impossible to state the degree to which specific findings may be replicated or transferred in other research settings. Instead, the qualitative researcher’s role is to provide thick description of details related to the field experiences and explicitly describe the patterns observed in people-both individually and collectively-within the specific context of the environment of
interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used brief field notes to record specific observations and ideas during the interviews with the women superintendents. Following each interview, I recorded thick description related to my observations during the interviews of each female superintendent, my interactions with her, body language, interactions with her staff, general observations related to her office staff, the underlying current within the office, and so on. These observations became a part of my field notes, which were often used to spur deeper reflection in my own reflexivity journal.

*Confirmability*

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents instead of researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One important component in qualitative design is to consider the researcher’s own positionality and its potential impact on the reporting of the data and results of the study itself. As the researcher in this study, I clearly stated my own positionality related to this research study. Throughout the study, I utilized several processes to ensure my own neutrality to the greatest extent possible. I organized the data in a manner that could be reviewed and audited by an outside investigator if needed. Also, I recorded, collected, and grouped the following data sources in an organized manner: raw interview data transcripts, notes and documents recording the coding process used in analyzing the interview data, theoretical notes and web analyses demonstrating relationships between the theories and data, field notes, and my own reflexivity journal. Finally, I applied the feminist theory itself, the feminist postructuralist theoretical framework, and the feminist standpoint theoretical framework as a means of
triangulating similar but yet different theoretical perspectives to examine and interpret the data.

Dependability

The literature also referred to the use of an audit as a means of determining the degree of dependability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guga, 1985). The purpose of this type of audit is for an external reviewer to evaluate the research process itself and to determine whether the results and interpretations of the study are, in fact, supported by the data (Creswell, 1998). For this research study, my dissertation chair collaborated with me regarding data collection and analysis, and throughout the entire dissertation research process, and reviewed all of the measures I used to ensure trustworthiness of my qualitative research study. In summary, trustworthiness was established by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the research process.

Timeline

Application for approval for the study was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Southern Mississippi in February 2015. Following notification of approval from the Institutional Review Board, I contacted all 34 female superintendents by email (Appendix B) to invite them to participate in the study. The female superintendents who agreed to participate in the study were contacted by email or phone to set up the time and location for each interview. I conducted interviews and observations beginning in early March 2015 and completed the final data collection at the end of April 2015.
In order to ensure confidentiality, the participants’ responses were identified using a randomly assigned pseudonym. At no time was the identity of the participants or the name or location of their school districts disclosed. The recordings and transcriptions from the interviews were stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home.

Table 2

*Participants According to Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Salary</th>
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<td>&gt;$150,000</td>
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</tr>
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<td>&gt;6000</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>&gt;$125,000</td>
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<td>East</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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Table 2 provides an overview of the general demographics of the female superintendents who participated in the study. The specific regions included the following general areas: coastal: school districts located along the Mississippi Gulf Coast; southern: school districts located within 30 miles of the Pine Belt (Hattiesburg area); northern: school districts in the Delta; and eastern: school districts located in the Piney Woods. One of my goals was to ensure that superintendents from all areas throughout the state were represented. In general, most areas throughout Mississippi were represented in the research study, with the exception of school districts located in the western area of the state. Due to lack of interest from female superintendents in the western area of the state, I was unsuccessful in securing interviews with any female superintendents from that area.

In order to ensure confidentiality, ranges were used to report student enrollment, accountability ratings, and superintendents’ salaries at each of the school districts represented. Student enrollment for the individual school districts led by these female superintendents ranged from two districts with less than 1,000 students to a district with almost 10,000 students. With regard to academic success as represented by the accountability ratings, on a scale from A to F (highest possible rating to lowest possible rating), districts led by the female superintendents participating in this study ranged from A to D. Other demographic information was omitted intentionally from the table to further ensure participants’ confidentiality. The study included four African American female superintendents and ten White female superintendents. Two of the participating superintendents were elected, but the remainder (and the majority) of the female superintendents were appointed by the local school board. Nine of the 14 participating female superintendents had earned a doctoral degree. Ten of the female superintendents
moved up the ranks within their own school districts to the superintendency. Only four of the participating women were hired from outside the school district.

**Individual Participants**

This section provides a brief biography of each of the 14 female superintendents who participated in the study.

*Hannah*

At the time of the study, Hannah served as superintendent in a school district located in the coastal area of Mississippi. When I sent the email invitations to the female superintendents throughout the state to participate in the study, Hannah was the first to respond that she wanted to participate. When I arrived at her office, it was clear that she had carved out this time for me and was eager to share her story. Hannah began her career in education as a teacher. After several years of teaching, Hannah worked with the Mississippi Department of Education and eventually served as Associate Superintendent, which placed her in a position as the supervisor of curriculum and instruction. She returned to the public school sector as the Deputy Superintendent in a large school district in Mississippi. Hannah later decided that she wanted to learn more about education outside of our state, so she applied and was selected for a position as deputy superintendent in a large school district located in the northern part of the United States where she served for three years.

Hannah shared that she had been a single parent since her child was a toddler. Knowing that her child was moving into the high school years, she decided she wanted to return to Mississippi in order to be closer to her parents. Hannah applied for the superintendent’s position that she currently holds at this time. At the time of this study,
she had served in this role for three years and reported, with pride, the district’s increasing academic success during her tenure thus far.

The interview with Hannah was my first one, so I was still somewhat nervous about taking care of all of the details, asking all the questions on the Interview Protocol, and so on, but Hannah’s confidence and poise truly eased my jitters. When I arrived, it was clear that she had set aside this time for our interview and made me feel that I was an important part of her day. Hannah’s demeanor was one of confidence, poise, and no nonsense. I felt that she was surprisingly frank with me, even bold at times, about the challenges she faced in her various leadership positions as a woman in Mississippi, and that she truly was honored to share her story.

Morgan

Morgan was serving as superintendent in a district along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Morgan began her career as an elementary school teacher in a school along the Gulf Coast. After teaching for seven years, she served as an elementary principal for six years in the district where she is currently the superintendent. Morgan shared her struggles, as she served as principal, following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She talked about the first days back, having to use tents and portable facilities, and simply having school during such difficult times. Morgan proudly stated that in spite of the devastation of Katrina, their school’s test scores that year were the second highest ever recorded. Morgan also shared that she was a single parent from the time her child was just a few months old until he/she was around the age of five. She emphasized how much she relied on her parents for assistance and did not know if she could have been
both single mother and principal at the same time. In addition, during this window of time, Morgan completed her doctoral studies. Later, Morgan remarried.

Following the retirement of the superintendent and the promotion of the assistant superintendent to that position, Morgan was promoted to assistant superintendent within the same district where she served as principal. When the previous superintendent moved to take a superintendency in another district in 2009, Morgan was named superintendent. She has served in this capacity since that time. Morgan shared that her current contract is up for renewal and will end in June 2015.

When I walked in Morgan’s office for the interview, she stood to shake my hand and told me that she had 30 minutes. Knowing how busy all superintendents are, I told her that I appreciated whatever time she could talk to me. I felt that her responses were very stifled and rehearsed and that I was taking valuable time that she did not have. I moved through the interview as quickly as possible. After about 20 minutes or so, the secretary called in and told Morgan that her next appointment had arrived. (I felt that this call was planned to get me out of there quickly.) At this point, I began to attempt to wrap up the conversation. I realized the information I was getting was somewhat rote and stifled and that I simply needed to end the interview. As I did so, Morgan seemed to relax, and it seemed as if she began speaking from her heart. I continued to attempt to end our time together, but Morgan continued to open up more than she had throughout the entire interview. At one point, her secretary even opened the door and told her that the next appointment was there. I learned that Morgan was meeting with one of her board members immediately following our meeting. I began to understand that Morgan had given me the only 30 minutes she had available all day. Having been there myself,
moving from one stressful meeting to another, I knew that she had done the best she could. Even in my own position, I understood how much preparation goes into preparing for a board meeting. Morgan’s leadership style was very direct and pointed. Just from my brief time with her, I could see how others may perceive her negatively. This was a good lesson for me in that I learned to refrain from judging the nature of the female superintendents and recognize that each of them is unique and different, and that is perfectly acceptable. In addition, I reflected on the many gender stereotypes related to these very type of behaviors, and I concluded that I had fallen into the very same pattern as many people do. In essence, I had classified her as “bossy” and “detached” when, in fact, she was simply extremely busy.

JoAnn

At the time of the study, JoAnn served as superintendent in a coastal district and community where she lived her entire life. Her father spent over 30 years as superintendent in the same district where she is now serving as superintendent. JoAnn began her teaching career as a band director. She worked in several coastal schools in this capacity for a number of years. For a brief time, she and her husband and children relocated to Virginia, where she became interested in administration. When her family returned to the Gulf Coast, her original home, JoAnn worked to get her master’s degree while working as a band director. JoAnn was hired as a principal at a school located at the same site where she attended school as a child. She served as an elementary, middle school, and high school principal before being named as superintendent. JoAnn moved into the superintendency in 1993 and has served in the same district where she was a
band director and principal. JoAnn’s husband retired several years ago, and her children are adults and live outside of Mississippi.

I met JoAnn last year when I was conducting a mini-study for a graduate class. I visited her office both times, and on both occasions, I made the same observations. JoAnn possesses a very kind, soft-spoken spirit, and it was clear on both visits that she carved out this time for me. As we talked, her genuine love for the school district and community permeated the entire interview. She is valued by the stakeholders associated with the school and deeply cares about the success of all students.

Tammy

Tammy was serving as superintendent in a large school district located in central Mississippi. She began her career as a middle school social studies teacher. After only two years as a classroom teacher, she completed the requirements for administrative certification and eventually served as assistant principal and principal in two school districts in central and south Mississippi. Eventually, she was promoted to central office and named assistant superintendent. Tammy remained in that position for eight years. Following the retirement of the superintendent in her district, she was promoted to the position of superintendent and has served in that position for slightly longer than one year.

At the time of the study, Tammy was a single parent of a daughter in high school. Because of her years of service as an administrator, especially when she was high school principal, Tammy’s mother became a huge support in helping to care for her daughter. As high school principal, Tammy had multiple evening events and numerous responsibilities. Tammy’s mother took on the parenting role so that Tammy could take care of the various
work-related responsibilities. Therefore, the transition into the superintendency was smooth because Tammy and her mother already had a well-established pattern of sharing the parenting responsibilities.

When I contacted Tammy about meeting for an interview, I planned to travel to her office. She suggested we meet at a local restaurant because she was traveling through this area. Therefore, I conducted the interview in this location. Even though there were numerous distractions, Tammy was very focused on our conversation, and I was satisfied with the interview. Throughout the interview, Tammy repeated how valuable the different positions she held throughout her career had been in preparing for the superintendency.

Joyce

Joyce was serving as superintendent of large district in south Mississippi. She began her career as a teacher at the middle school level where she taught public speaking and served as a counselor at the middle and high school levels. After Joyce received her administrative license, she became a middle school assistant principal and eventually moved into a high school principalship. All of Joyce’s experiences in education were in the same school district, where she was serving as superintendent at the time of the study. Following the retirement of her previous mentor and superintendent, Joyce served in an interim capacity as superintendent. The superintendent’s position within this district was an elected position. After discussion with her family, Joyce decided to run for the office of the superintendency. In the interview, she talked about the challenges of “putting yourself out there” and dealing with the politics of running for office. Joyce was successful in her race for the superintendency and had been in office for less than a year
when the interview was conducted. Joyce was one of two female superintendents represented in this study who were elected to their positions.

Joyce was married and had two children who were high school and college aged. As superintendent in the district where she previously taught or served as a building level administrator, Joyce talked about the struggles as she attends events and serves in both the mother and superintendency roles. When planning for the interview phase of my study, Joyce was one of the first superintendents to respond that she was interested in participating. Having known her prior to meeting with her, I anticipated the interview would be very brief. In general, I had observed that Joyce was quiet and reserved and often seemed to sit back and watch instead of speaking out. In our meeting, however, Joyce was extremely welcoming and talkative. She had clearly blocked off time for our interview and was very open in our conversation. Joyce offered a different viewpoint since she was one of only two of the participating female superintendents who were elected.

Sarah

Sarah was serving as superintendent in a small district in eastern Mississippi. Prior to teaching, Sarah worked as a secretary and bookkeeper. Eventually she returned to school and received a bachelor’s degree in secondary education with reading, English, and special education endorsements. Sarah taught middle and high school English and reading in two different districts. With her husband’s support, Sarah returned to graduate school while her children were young. Eventually, she was promoted to assistant superintendent and was responsible for special education, federal programs, professional
development, and numerous other responsibilities. She served in this capacity for approximately 10 years.

Following a lengthy illness, Sarah’s husband passed away in 2011. During the same time frame, the superintendent, with whom she had worked for many years, retired. Because of the stress of the death of her husband, the school board asked Sarah to serve in an interim capacity to allow her time to recover emotionally. In January of 2012, Sarah was named superintendent.

When I met with Sarah, she met me at the door of the office. I felt welcomed, and it was clear that she had set aside the morning for us to meet. She had a very unique personality compared to some of the female superintendents I interviewed. Sarah was quiet and reserved, very thoughtful before answering each question. I felt an immediate bond with her, and our interview was relaxed and comfortable. In addition to exuding a sense of calmness, Sarah was very deliberate as she responded to my questions, often pausing to reflect before responding. Sarah was not a “look at me” kind of person; she repeatedly expressed a deep passion for teachers and students and views her role, as their superintendent, to serve.

*Rose*

At the time of the study, Rose was serving as superintendent in a school district located in east Mississippi. Rose was not a native Mississippian, and she initially taught upper elementary grades for approximately 12 years in Oklahoma. She did not elaborate on what brought her to Mississippi but shared that she moved to north Mississippi in 1993. Rose’s teaching experiences included various elementary assignments. She was eventually promoted to assistant superintendent where she began grant writing and many
other duties as they were assigned to her. One year later, the superintendent retired, and she was promoted to the superintendency. She remained there for eight years as superintendent. Rose decided to seek a position elsewhere and was selected as superintendent in the district where she was serving at the time of the study. She had been in this district for nine years.

My meeting with Rose was scheduled for a Friday afternoon. While waiting for Rose, I noticed the lobby looked like a place where students were the focus. There were photographs of students engaged in various activities, framed student artwork, and children’s books readily available in the waiting area. The office was very quiet, and Rose welcomed me by greeting me in the front lobby. As we began the meeting, I noticed that her general demeanor was one of quiet and calmness. In fact, her voice was so quiet that I was concerned her responses would not be loud enough to be recorded for transcribing. Rose explained her passion for early childhood and making sure that young children have a strong start in school. It was clear from our conversation that this had been an area of focus for her as superintendent.

Rose was divorced and had three married children with their own children. By the time she moved into the superintendency, two of her children were no longer living at home, and the youngest child was in middle school. She reported that some of the barriers she might have faced by having young children and serving as superintendent simultaneously were not an issue for her due to the ages of her children. Rose contradicted herself throughout the interview, first, denying any awareness of incidences related to any type of gender bias throughout her career. Yet, at another point, Rose
provided examples of observing gender discrimination. Overall, she seemed “put off” by any implication that female superintendents encounter challenges related to gender.

*Ann*

Ann served as superintendent of a school district in north Mississippi. Ann started her career in education as a teacher assistant. After earning her degree, she taught both elementary and middle school. Ann moved into administration and served as assistant principal for six years at the elementary level. She was promoted and served two years in the principal’s position at the upper elementary school. While serving as principal, she was asked to move to central office as an interim assistant superintendent. During her time at central office, she worked under two superintendents, one who was a woman. In both cases, there was a significant degree of conflict, and neither was successful. While Ann’s tenure as superintendent was initially extremely challenging, she emphasized her long-standing presence in the community helped lead the district forward.

Due to illness, Ann had been the primary caretaker for her mother for over 20 years. She dated the man who became her husband for many years before their marriage, and they had only been married for five years. Ann had one daughter, but her mother was a constant supporter of Ann’s work and remained healthy enough to provide assistance with Ann’s daughter as well.

Immediately upon meeting Ann for the first time, I felt an instant connection. I felt she was very honest about the challenges she faced in her tenure as superintendent. Ann’s focus, as superintendent, had been on developing relationships with all of the stakeholders and building bridges between the public and private schools to increase community support.
Beth

Beth was serving as superintendent in an average-sized school district in the northern part of Mississippi. At the time of the study, she was in her early 40’s, the youngest of all of the female superintendents who participated interviewed. Beth grew up in north Mississippi and graduated from a college in the same area. She was the first of her family to earn a college degree. Beth taught upper elementary school for 10 years, and earned National Board Certification during this time. Throughout her career, Beth was continually engaged in furthering her education, eventually earning a Ph.D. She moved into administration as an assistant principal at the upper elementary level and was eventually promoted to the principalship. At the time of the interview, Beth was in her second year as superintendent.

Beth was married with two children. When she took the superintendent’s position, she and her husband agreed it was critical for her to live in the community where she serves. Beth and her family moved to the community, but her husband continued to commute to the town where they previously lived, due to her husband’s employment situation. Since being named superintendent, Beth had been reviewing the status of the district’s finances and personnel needs before making drastic plans.

Beth’s primary focus was curriculum and instruction. As superintendent, she was actively engaged in assisting one of her schools with needed changes related to curriculum and instruction. It did not take long before I realized that Beth, while she was very young, was also very wise and driven. She was confident and straightforward in her communication skills. Throughout our time together, Beth shared a number of challenges
she encountered, as a young woman attempting to move into educational leadership roles in Mississippi.

_Barbara_

Barbara was serving as superintendent in an average-sized district in north Mississippi. She and I tried repeatedly to schedule a time when I could meet with her face-to-face, but we were unable to work it out. We agreed upon a phone interview and scheduled a specific time for me to call. Barbara had already experienced a long career in education. She started her career in music education and eventually returned to school to obtain licensure for teaching special education students. Even though she was serving as superintendent in north Mississippi, Barbara previously taught in school districts in the central part of the state. Barbara moved into administration as an assistant principal at the middle school level. From there, she advanced to middle school principal and served in that same school for ten years. Following a move to central Mississippi, due to a family member’s illness, Barbara moved into another middle school principalship. Eventually she returned to the northern part of the state and was named assistant superintendent. After four years in this position, Barbara was promoted to superintendent. At the time of the study, she was ending her fourth year in this position.

Barbara’s husband passed away several years ago. Her children were adults and lived out of state. She maintained a home in the community where she and her husband lived prior to his death, but she also had a home in the community where she was superintendent. For the most part, Barbara resided in the district where she served. We had our phone interview on the Thursday afternoon before the long Easter weekend.
Barbara was driving to her home community for the weekend. She typically traveled there once a month.

Even on the phone, Barbara had a commanding presence. She had a bold voice and was energetic even on the eve of a holiday weekend. In spite of the fact that we were unable to meet in person, I felt that it was a meaningful interview. Barbara was very frank in talking about the challenges of women serving in positions such as the superintendency. In most cases, she echoed many of the concerns and observations that other women mentioned during their interviews. Barbara emphasized “timing” in terms of accessing the superintendency. She explained that certain circumstances at specific times likely influenced the degree to which a female superintendent was the “right” choice for a district. She went on to talk about having the “right fit” and the importance of this for both the district and the superintendent candidate as well.

Vicki

Vicki was in her 13th year as superintendent of a district in southern Mississippi. Her professional experiences were somewhat unique in that she also served as superintendent in Louisiana. Vicki began her career as an elementary school teacher where she and her husband lived. While teaching, Vicki returned to school, earning both a master’s and a doctoral degree, and also becoming a mother. She eventually moved into a principal’s position at a small school. When the superintendent’s position became available in the same district where she was teaching, Vicki applied and was named superintendent. After a six-year stint as superintendent and going through a divorce, Vicki retired from Louisiana and returned to Mississippi. Vicki applied for numerous superintendent positions in Mississippi. Even though she made the top three several
times, she was not selected for a position. Just before giving up, a male colleague told her about the position she held at the time of the study. Vicki applied for the position and had been superintendent there for 13 years. Vicki’s second husband passed away a few years ago, and she remained single. She considered retiring, but she continued to struggle with this decision.

When I met with Vicki, it was clear that she planned on spending whatever time I needed for the interview. She spoke very frankly about her career and stated she had not really faced barriers in her attempt to move upward in educational leadership. As she talked, she paused to reflect on several events that occurred over the years. Vicki stated she had not really perceived those incidences as gender bias at the time and went on to add that perhaps she had, in fact, actually encountered some gender-biased experiences without even realizing it.

*Lynn*

Lynn was serving in her first year as superintendent in a small school district in south Mississippi, where she has spent her entire career. She had a long career in education and first served as a music teacher at various levels. Early in Lynn’s career, a young principal provided her multiple opportunities to serve as a teacher leader. These experiences led Lynn into administrative positions as assistant principal, principal, and multiple roles at the central office level. She also earned her Ph.D. while working full-time. When Lynn’s previous superintendent retired, the school board named Lynn interim superintendent, and she was later named superintendent of the district.

Lynn was married and had three adult children. Her husband was a teacher in the district where she served as superintendent. During our conversation, she talked about her
husband’s support and how much it had meant to her over the years. During our meeting, Lynn spoke from her heart about concerns related to financial needs of the district. Since this community was Lynn’s home, she had significant connections to most of the families represented within the schools. She shared stories of teaching some of today’s parents when they were attending Vacation Bible School years ago. Throughout the interview, Lynn became emotional as she described her worries about the district’s many needs.

_Nancy_

Nancy served as superintendent in a moderately large school district located in south Mississippi. She was one of two elected female superintendents who participated in this study. Even though Nancy earned a degree in education and held a teaching certificate, she began her career in finance and worked in south Mississippi. After working in the field of industry, Nancy taught business education in the local school district, a job that she held for 22 years. She earned her administration certificate and was hired as assistant principal at the school where she previously taught. Nancy decided to run for superintendent after observing a number of issues that concerned her. She was elected and was serving in her fourth year of her term at the time of this study. Nancy was married and had adult children and grandchildren. She emphasized she did not feel that she could have served as superintendent when her children were young, due to the long hours and overall demands of the position.

When I first arrived for my meeting with Nancy, she seemed agitated and reminded me this was the day before a holiday, and she was very busy. I assured her that we would make the interview as brief as needed. When Nancy began talking, she became more and more engaged in the interview, and it ended up being one of my longest ones. I
was struck by her knowledge of finances as she discussed attending the Board of Supervisors’ meeting and requesting an increase in the funding provided by the local taxes. Clearly, she possessed a keen understanding of school finances, and she shared numerous examples of how she used this knowledge to benefit the school district.

Summary

This qualitative study used a basic interpretive design to understand the phenomenon of the small numbers of women currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi. The study investigated perceived barriers faced by current Mississippi female superintendents. Further study examined perceived traits, dispositions, and practices of women who were currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi. All 34 female superintendents in Mississippi were invited to participate in the study. As the researcher, I traveled to 11 of the female superintendent’s school districts to conduct interviews face-to-face, conducted two interviews by phone, and met one superintendent at a location of her request (due to traveling). Data were collected using one-hour, semi-structured interviews with each of the female superintendents who agreed to participate in the study. These interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, and the data were transcribed into textual data. In addition to the data collected in the interviews, I used field notes and a reflexivity journal as a means of recording both reflective and methodological entries related to the research study.

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within the data analysis process, the constructs associated with feminist theory, feminist post-structuralism, and feminist standpoint perspectives were applied to the data in order to address the research
questions. In order to establish trustworthiness, I used triangulation of the data, member checks, and peer debriefing.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the findings with regard to the data from the interviews, field notes, and the reflexivity journal. During the data analysis process, I merged data from the reflexivity journal to avoid repetition of the two data sources. As a result, references to field notes may include data originally recorded in the reflexivity journal. In this study, 14 female superintendents in Mississippi shared experiences related to their professional roles. The participants represented various regions throughout Mississippi as follows: coastal: three, southern: four, eastern: two, central: two, and northern: three. The primary purpose of the study was to understand the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of women serving as superintendents in Mississippi. The study sought to understand perceived barriers facing Mississippi female superintendents while striving to understand the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women leading school districts in Mississippi. This chapter provides an overview of the data gathered from the interviews.

Review of the Research Questions

The research questions for this study were designed with a two-fold purpose in mind. The first purpose was to gain an understanding of why women in Mississippi continue to be underrepresented in the top leadership role in public school education, the superintendency. In order to delve into this phenomenon, this study provided opportunities for current female superintendents in Mississippi to share their own perceptions and experiences related to barriers women encounter in accessing the
superintendency or during their tenure. The second purpose of the research was to look closely at the common traits, dispositions, and practices of the women in Mississippi who have successfully accessed the superintendency to provide guidance in developing future female superintendents in Mississippi.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What were the perceptions of women who were currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting in Mississippi regarding barriers to the superintendency?

2. What were the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi?

Organization of Data

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed two broad over-arching themes relative to the underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi public schools. Essentially, the data, in its entirety, provided the female superintendents’ perspectives on (1) hindrances to women’s success as superintendent, and (2) facilitators for women’s success as superintendent. Therefore, these two broad over-arching themes were used as criteria for sorting the remainder of the data. The first theme, hindrances to female superintendents’ success, included data the women perceived negatively impacted the degree their success as superintendents in Mississippi. The second theme, facilitators for female superintendents’ success, included data the women perceived positively impacted their success as superintendents in Mississippi.
Under each over-arching theme, sub-themes also emerged. Table 2 illustrates the over-arching themes and corresponding sub-themes.

Table 3

*Major Findings*

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<td>I) Hindrances to Female Superintendents’ Success</td>
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<td>II) Facilitators of Female Superintendents’ Success</td>
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<td>A. Women’s Belief Systems</td>
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<td>B. Leadership Practices</td>
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<td>C. Mentors</td>
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**Presentation of Data**

Table 3 provides an organizational structure used to sort the findings of the research study. Two over-arching themes were identified, hindrances to female superintendents’ success and facilitators of female superintendents’ success. Data related to the over-arching theme, hindrances, was then sorted into internal or external hindrances. Internal hindrances included data related to traditional gender-role expectations as mother and wife, women’s lack of aspirations, and the “no problem problem.” Data representing external hindrances were sorted into politics, gender
stereotypes, the Good Ole Boys’ Club, and the glass ceiling. Data related to facilitators were sorted into women’s belief systems, leadership practices, and mentors.

Hindrances to Women’s Success as Superintendent

*Internal Hindrances*

For the purposes of this study, internal hindrances referred to obstacles or challenges that were self-imposed or assumed by female superintendents voluntarily. Of the 14 female superintendents who participated in the study, their family structures varied. Three of the women were single parents with at least one child still living at home. Four of the women were married with children still living in the home. Four female superintendents were married, but their children were independent adults at the time of the study. Three women were widowed.

*Traditional gender role expectations as mother.* Many of the female superintendents experienced challenges related to traditional gender role expectations when attempting to coexist in the roles of superintendent and mother. Four women whose children no longer lived at home reported having the dual responsibilities of serving, as mother and superintendent, would have been an impossible barrier to overcome during the time their children were still living at home. They stated they would not have even considered moving into the superintendency during the phase of their lives when their role as mother required a significant focus. Even though their family structures changed over time, the women who became superintendents after their own children moved away from home stated they still faced challenges of finding time for family. They also added their current responsibilities, as superintendents, now often infringe upon time they would like to spend with grandchildren. When reflecting upon the women expressing the
challenges related to the “mother-superintendent” role, I recorded the following entry in my Field Notes:

Interestingly enough, the women often became emotional, eyes filling with tears, as they shared the significant internal conflict they continually battled, in terms of fulfilling the responsibilities of the superintendency and of being a mother. They often implied that they never seemed to do enough for their children, and were distracted by the guilt from not being able to give their best to either responsibility – the superintendency nor motherhood. This seemed to be an ongoing battle.

Of the women who moved into the superintendency while their children remained at home, all emphasized the importance of having had significant support in taking care of the tasks typically associated with being a mother. Specifically, the women who served as superintendents and were single mothers described receiving substantial help with responsibilities generally associated with their role as mothers. Morgan, for example, shared that she was a young, divorced mother, whose parents provided extensive support in taking care of her young child and believed she would not have been able to pursue graduate school and eventually the superintendency, if her family had not provided unfailing support. She stated:

As the mother, you feel responsible for that role. If I had not had support, that would have been a major problem. In fact, I’m not sure I could’ve done it. Having strong family support would attribute to the success especially if there are children involved.

For the majority of her career, Ann was also a single mother to a young daughter. Ann’s mother lived with Ann and her daughter and shared the mothering role while Ann
worked her way up the career ladder. Eventually, Ann married, but she stated she could not have advanced in her career without the intense, ongoing support provided by her own mother. Tammy, another single mother, counted on her mother to step in as a substitute mother for her daughter on a daily basis. Even when Tammy was principal, her mother took on roles and responsibilities typically expected of the mother. This long-standing support continued when Tammy moved into the superintendency. According to Tammy:

Most days I worked a 16-hour day, so I would leave home at 6:00, bright and early in the morning, and sometimes I didn’t get back home until 11:00 at night.

So she [her mother] just took care of whatever needed to be taken care of. I didn’t have to worry about my daughter being taken care of.

Traditional gender role expectations as wife. The married female superintendents described the interaction between themselves and their spouses as constantly shifting and adapting between nontraditional and traditional gender roles, in terms of taking care of their children. Essentially, the participating women, as those who were successful in accessing the superintendency, moved into roles historically held by men. Because of this, many of the female participants in this study and their spouses also took on nontraditional roles in order to meet the needs of their families and to ensure the success of the women in their work-related roles. They reported a “give and take” type of relationship, with both husband and wife constantly shifting back and forth between the typical perceived gender role stereotypes. The women reported the significance of their husbands being available to listen and encourage them as they continually dealt with highly stressful situations at work. Barbara stated, “I had someone that was there to take
care of the kids and be an encourager, a listener, a motivator – not always to give me advice, but just to be there to listen when there were situations going on.”

The husbands of these women, typically viewed as breadwinners of the family, often made less money than their spouses, but the women reported this as a comfortable agreement between husband and wife, not as a gender role conflict. Beth stated, “For right now, I make more money than my husband. But, it’s our money, family money.” The female superintendents also stated their husbands offered extensive support in taking care of cleaning, cooking, and car-pooling the children. While interviewing Lynn, her husband stopped by the office to get her keys to have the car serviced. I recorded the following reflection in my Field Notes:

Behind this woman is a strong supportive spouse. Right in the middle of our interview, Lynn’s husband opened her office door, grabbed her keys, along with a list of errands he needed to take care of, apologized for interrupting, and went on his way. It was clear that this is part of a mutual agreement that they have as partners in their marriage.

Even with the fluidity of the typical male/female roles between the female superintendents and their spouses, some women reported experiencing a deep inner struggle as they attempted balancing the deeply engrained gender role expectations as mother, wife, and their role as female superintendent. In struggling between her superintendent role versus that of mother, Sarah stated:

A male is typically not going to be the caregiver of the children. He’s not going to be the one who gets up when they’re sick or have the meals ready or packs the lunches, so he can go on about his business. A lot of times I feel like I am
cheating the kids. My oldest son, I never went to one of his pep rallies. He played football, and I never went to a pep rally because I didn’t feel like I could leave and go do that. His senior year, I thought, ‘I’m gonna’ go to one,’ so I did. It’s just the little things like that. You think your job is more important, and it is important, but how well I know, [that] your family is really most important, or it should be.

Beth also shared the inner struggle she experienced in letting go of her own perceptions of the traditional mother/wife role:

When I finish the day, I still have to go home and I have to wash the clothes and clean house. My husband is supportive, but I know my house is a reflection of me. I’m sometimes resentful to know that I still have to go home and be the wife and mommy.

Not only did the women discuss changing roles within their family lives, they also emphasized the challenges their families faced in coming to terms with the public role of the female superintendents and the commitment required of the entire family unit. While deciding whether to run for the office of superintendent, Joyce stated she knew her family’s full support would be critical if she decided to enter the race for superintendent. According to Joyce, “It was a family decision for me to run. It was hard on my family, having to throw my husband and sons out there.” In addition, the women emphasized how difficult it was for their families to become accustomed to the people in the community who talked negatively about the schools, in general, and especially when the talk was aimed directly at the female superintendent. When Ann moved into the superintendent’s role, she began to make necessary changes in order to address
significant concerns plaguing the district prior to her tenure. Ann described her own family’s struggle with the resulting constant public displays of disrespect:

People having conversations about the school and tying me to these conversations - my family wasn’t used to the community and parental role that comes with being the superintendent. When you become the superintendent, everything in the district is tied to you.

Overall, the families of the female superintendents perceived the women in gender-specific roles, such as daughter, wife, and/or mother. However, the public nature of the superintendency, historically a role associated with gendered expectations for men, exposed the women and their families to much more public scrutiny.

Women’s lack of aspirations. The female superintendents blamed gender role expectations for many women’s lack of aspirations in advancing to higher leadership opportunities, such as the superintendency. Several of the female superintendents reported that women themselves fail to speak out on their own behalf, causing them to be perceived as weak, inferior, or uninterested in climbing the career ladder. Hannah stated women’s greatest barriers are primarily self-imposed:

I see female leaders kinda’ shirk away from having very public commentary or taking on the male dominated leadership in a forceful way. If a woman is aggressive, and if a woman is forceful, then you have the connotation of being that person that’s not necessarily the nice word. So, you walk a very fine line between how you can make sure you put enough “southern sugar” on it to make it palatable but at the same time, still very firmly hold up for your convictions. It’s still hard for women in leadership positions to talk up for themselves.
The female superintendents indicated many women tiptoe around job-related issues, even those with the potential to significantly impact each of them on a personal level. For example, Hannah discussed salary negotiations with other female superintendents. She explained the women were typically uncomfortable speaking up for themselves and reported:

You can hear it in the conversation completely different from a demand, as opposed to a request. With women, it’s still very much a request. Men walk into that conversation differently, and with men, it’s a demand.

In my Field Notes, I reflected:
I agree with Hannah in that women don’t want to speak up on their own behalf, especially when it comes to salary negotiations. Last year, I was very uncomfortable in even bringing up the topic of a raise in my salary. But, I did it. And I held firm. I was shocked that I was actually granted the salary increase. I should’ve done it sooner.

Beth also reported incidences where women themselves failed to self-promote and were unwilling to take risks, possibly because they were trying to keep up the societal image of a “southern lady.” She stated, “My female counterparts are still trying to be the southern lady and win you over.”

Morgan questioned the degree to which Mississippi women even desire to move into the superintendency, asking, “Are women even seeing themselves in these positions?” Several of the female superintendents stated their colleagues simply demonstrate a lack of confidence and fail to even seek these positions. Rose reported women who worked with her were much more qualified than she was when she moved
into the superintendency, but these women did not perceive themselves as having the necessary background and skill set. Several of the participants also blamed their female colleagues for demonstrating behaviors aligned with gender stereotypical behaviors such as breaking down crying in difficult situations.

The female superintendents offered words of wisdom for women aspiring to the superintendency but lack confidence needed to pursue these types of leadership positions. Renee reported she was initially extremely intimidated by male superintendents when she first became superintendent. When attending the large superintendents’ meetings, she realized very quickly, “They didn’t know anymore than I knew about what was going on, or how to run things.” This realization boosted her confidence and helped her move forward in her role as superintendent. Morgan also questioned women’s degree of confidence in pursuing the superintendency and offered the following words of advice to females aspiring to the superintendency:

Don’t be complacent. Be willing to take a chance. You may need to move in order to move up in your career. You must go for it. Being a woman is only a barrier if you let it be. You cannot let that enter it. If you, yourself, let that enter it, you’re always going to have, there’s going to be a barrier because it’s gonna’ be up there in your mind.

The no problem problem. Several of the participants in the study failed to acknowledge or denied experiencing any type of gender bias. This attitude represented another internal hindrance to women overcoming the continuing underrepresentation of females in the superintendency in Mississippi. Rhode (2014) labeled this phenomenon as the “no problem problem” (p.6), referring to women’s failure to recognize or
acknowledge gender bias as a problem, and the ongoing disagreement among women as to whether the issue should even be addressed.

In some cases, the women referred to specific challenging incidences encountered throughout their own careers, but these women did not perceive these as related to any type of gender bias. For example, when Lynn was promoted to an administrative position within the school where she previously served as teacher, she perceived the fact that her former female colleagues “gave her a hard time” due to the fact that she was a music teacher rather than considering whether gender played any part in the frustrations she experienced. Vicki, a long-time superintendent, reported she did not see any different expectations based on gender and that all superintendents throughout the state are bound by the same expectations. Morgan explained that her own gender never crossed her mind as she served in a male dominated profession. She emphasized,

We all stand for academics and want the very best for the kids in the area. I’ve not experienced, nor have I seen that go on in this district and I haven’t worked in another area to know if they’re treated differently.

Lynn, Vicki, and Morgan denied the existence of problems related to gender bias as they served in the superintendency.

During my interview with Vicki, she discussed the challenges she faced when trying to secure a superintendent’s position in Mississippi. Even though she served as superintendent in Louisiana for a number of years, she found securing a position in Mississippi to be a challenge. While she was in the top three for a number of the different positions for which she applied, it took her quite awhile to actually land a position as superintendent in Mississippi. Vicki acknowledged that she had not previously
considered whether gender had played a part in this until our conversation during the interview.

In my Field Notes, I recorded:

Vicki related her frustrations in trying to land a superintendent’s position in Mississippi. Even though she had several years’ experience as superintendent in another state, she had never even considered her own gender as part of the problem. It was like a revelation to her right there in the moment, during the interview. Almost as fast as she acknowledged that gender might have been an obstacle for her, she made a joke about the whole issue and seemed to be unwilling to acknowledge that there was any problem.

Immediately following Vicki’s acknowledgment that her struggles to move into the superintendency in Mississippi may have, in fact, been impacted by gender, she seemed bewildered. Vicki named the specific school districts in Mississippi where she applied and was unsuccessful in being selected for the superintendent’s position. She explained that she felt her interviews went well, but each time, she was not selected for the position. After this brief reflection time, Vicki quickly ended this part of the interview and joked, “Well, the one good thing about fewer women in administrative roles is you don’t have to wait in line for the restroom.” Even when Vicki realized that gender may have, in fact, served as a barrier when she attempted to access the superintendency in Mississippi, she was unwilling to acknowledge gender discrimination as a problem.

The over-arching theme of my interview with Morgan centered upon her insistence that she had never faced any gender-related barriers throughout any part of her career as an educator. She shared her experiences of being named principal in her late
20’s, moving into the assistant superintendent’s position after a few years, and then landing the superintendent’s job. Morgan also implied that any suggestion of women facing barriers to moving into the superintendency in Mississippi were unfounded. In spite of Morgan’s repeated denial of any experiences related to hindrances for female superintendents in Mississippi, at the end of the interview, she contradicted herself and stated, “It’s still a battle, and I think it’s gonna’ continue for awhile, but the more women take the chance, the more that apply, that go after it, the more that will be hired.”

In stark contrast to the responses from female superintendents from the coastal and southern parts of the state, each of the women from the northern school districts in Mississippi openly described the challenges they faced in acquiring any leadership position in education and especially as superintendent. Ann stated, “Women not being able to access the superintendency in Mississippi, is it a problem? Yes, it’s a problem. It is, it is indeed a problem.”

External Hindrances

For the purposes of this study, external hindrances included challenges beyond the control of the female superintendents. The discussion related to external hindrances begins with politics, which encompasses female superintendents’ hindrances related to both local and state politics. In addition, gender-related stereotypes, including perceptions related to women’s capacity to perform jobs associated with the superintendency, perceptions of women as leaders, and perceptions of female leaders’ traits, dispositions, and practices were presented. Finally, the Good Ole Boys’ Club and the Glass Ceiling were discussed as additional external hindrances for female superintendents.
Politics. All of the female superintendents agreed that politics represented a significant component of their overall role, as superintendents, in Mississippi. Twelve of the participants were appointed, and two were elected. Most of the appointed women stated they would never have been interested in the position if they had been required to run for office. One of the elected superintendents talked about the challenges she faced in running for office:

I do not like the political side. I’m not political. I stay in touch with all that, and I have an opinion, but I’m just not somebody who…I don’t know, campaigning, you just feel like you step up on somebody’s porch, and you feel like you’re begging. There’s just no other way to explain it. You literally throw yourself out there.

Nancy, the other elected female superintendent, agreed that she felt uncomfortable dealing with politics, in terms of being selected for the position. She stated, “I literally played the political game because I knew it was necessary.” Nancy went on to describe her own personal decision to run as a Democrat, even though she always considered herself a Republican, because the Republican governor himself voted against public education repeatedly, and she did not feel she could align herself with him due to his voting practices. Therefore, she ran as a Democrat and won the election.

Female superintendents and state politics. The female participants expressed differing views related to the manner in which they approached the political side of the superintendency. Hannah shared her thoughts on the superintendent’s role and state politics:
I believe strongly that if we want education to change in this state, it will only happen by engaging the political arena. Our problem, as an educational entity in the state, is that there has been no strong support or voice with the politicians.

Hannah emphasized the importance of educators sending a collective voice to state politicians. She viewed her role, as superintendent, as the messenger to provide teachers and the community information needed in order to know what was happening in the political arena. Hannah emphasized:

I don’t feel like, as a superintendent, that I have any choice but to do that because, otherwise, I am not providing the information that they need to be an educated populace. Yes, for me, politics is strong. Now, some people will tell you that it’s not a superintendent’s role, but I don’t know how you do this work unless you are very much involved with the political realm.

Hannah also proudly emphasized the active role many of her parents and community members took in speaking publicly on political issues such as school funding. In general, a few of the participating female superintendents were direct in approaching the political side of their jobs in a manner similar to Hannah’s approach. While Tammy sometimes contacted legislators directly, she believed a more effective approach was to “engage the people that I know can take that information back for me.” She went on to describe state legislators’ decision-making process and stated, “They [state politicians] are gonna’ do what they want to do anyway, and I don’t think it’s gonna’ matter who goes and who says what.” Tammy also shared she recently recorded a commercial for the “Better Schools” group’s initiative. She was unsure if the “Better Schools” initiative would make any difference in the politician’s decisions and stated, “I really don’t care
what they [politicians] think…As long as I know what I’m doing is the right thing for children.”

However, most of the women took a different, more indirect approach in dealing with political issues. The majority of the women reported they worked to build relationships with the politicians instead of taking an active, direct (or confrontational) approach. Several stated they disagreed with male and female superintendents traveling to the legislative session to show a united stand and believed this approach may actually backfire and make the legislators angry. The women who approached politics in an indirect manner perceived their role, as superintendents, was to inform teachers of decisions made in Jackson and to answer teachers’ questions. Instead of focusing on political matters, Sarah stated, “Our focus should be on the children.”

**Female superintendents and local politics.** When discussing local politics, most of the women indicated they worked to build relationships with various stakeholder groups, and this helped them navigate the local political plane. JoAnn shared that she recently dismissed a popular school employee, causing significant political turmoil within the community. However, the hearing committee supported her decision, and following that, the community seemed to settle down and move on. Hannah emphasized the critical role the superintendent holds in the community and stated, “The superintendent is essentially the moral compass of the community,” implying superintendents’ decisions and actions must be aligned to the expectations of the community.

The women reported positive relationships with their local school boards, an entity they perceived as a potential political barrier. A few women shared that their boards did not really know what to think of them when they were first named
superintendent, but they eventually “came around” and were supportive. Several women shared challenges they faced when a new board member joined the group. Each of the women who talked about adding a new board member, as a challenge, also explained these challenges as a natural part of the process of welcoming a new board member. In addition, the women understood their role, as superintendent, was to provide adequate support and professional development for the new board member to learn his or her role.

Vicki emphasized the importance of being able to “read your board.” She explained she always made sure she knew where her board stood on issues before putting the issues up for a vote. Indicating Vicki’s proficiency in learning to play the local political game to succeed as superintendent, she explained that if she had doubts about having adequate support from the board, she simply placed the topic on the agenda for discussion and tabled it for further discussion before actually bringing it to the table for a vote. Sarah emphasized she is “very up front” with her board. Several of the female superintendents stated they regularly communicated with the board regarding the chain of command so that when community members called them with complaints, the board member should insist upon the individual contacting the superintendent. From there, the superintendent contacted the individuals who could help with resolving the matter, rather than the school board member getting involved. Most of the women reported their boards, including new members, typically grew to understand the process and encouraged parents and community members to follow the chain of command.

Some of the participants shared specific examples relating to their own understanding of individual board members, and the board, as a group. Renee reported that one older male school board member on her board “still believes that a man should
be doing this job.” As a result, she initially experienced some challenges, but understanding that he came from a different generation helped her to be more tolerant of his views. Also, Lynn stated that one elderly school board member did not have access to receive the monthly board packets electronically. Because of this, she hand-delivered board packets to ensure he received the information when expected. Joyce shared that her board often challenged one another in their meetings. Rather than join in the conflict, she took a hands-off approach and allowed them to finish arguing. She stated that eventually they came to a decision.

Most of the women did not perceive their board as being very political. However, Renee emphasized, “Board relationships are tricky, but you have to be ever aware of this. When you’re superintendent, learn how to count to three” (referring to making sure that the vote results in a 3-2 majority since most boards include five members). In general, the women perceived their role as facilitator, offering ideas and insights on solutions to problems, but recognized the board as the decision-making body. Overall, when there were issues that could potentially result in conflict or crisis, most of the female superintendents approached local and state politics with an indirect, hands-off attitude. In addition, they perceived a direct approach as not resulting in positive results.

Gender-related stereotypes. Even though some of the women denied gender impacting them negatively, most of the female participants identified gender stereotypes as a significant barrier in both accessing and serving in the superintendency. The women reported society continues to hold different expectations for what is perceived as appropriate for women and men in terms of job-related roles, behaviors, and attitudes or
dispositions. In addition, these expectations conflicted with one another, depending upon any given situation.

One of the gender stereotypes related to women’s capacity to perform the jobs associated with the superintendency. When Joyce was running for the office of superintendent, she received ongoing comments associate with gender and degree of fitness for the job. For example, Joyce reported men repeatedly made comments such as, “We need a woman in that position because you’re educating our children.” On the other hand, Joyce reported a number of individuals stressed, “You’re a woman, you can’t handle Mr. X” (referring to various individuals living in the community). Several people also advised her to take her husband along when she planned to meet with certain people so that she would be protected, if a conflict arose.

Many of the other women echoed Joyce’s experiences and reported that society, as a whole, still perceives the superintendency as a man’s job. For example, Ann stated:

I don’t know how conscious people are of it, but I think they feel like a man in this seat can handle those irate parents better. He can handle the teachers better. Men are perceived to have a no-nonsense type of mindset that people are going to accept his decisions and not challenge him as much as they are going to do us [referring to female superintendents].

Society’s perception of women as leaders also represented another gender-related stereotype. According to several of the female superintendents, people generally perceive women in leadership positions as cold and distant. Hannah described the importance of paying attention to her image as a female in leadership. She explained she spent
significant amounts of time in schools interacting with teachers in an effort to overcome this gender-related stereotype.

According to Hannah:

I have to do more of my work in the schools, having conversations with teachers.

I have to make sure that the image I portray is always one that is very sensitive because women leaders can be thought of as being very cold.

In some cases, the women shared stories where male superintendents themselves expected certain behaviors of female superintendents. When attending one of her first superintendents’ meetings, Hannah observed the men and women sitting on opposite sides of the room, creating a clear visual divide. In one of these meetings, a male colleague pointed to the other side of the room and explained to Hannah, “The ladies generally sit over there.” She also reported women rarely speak out at these meetings, “We are still incredibly quiet, kinda’ sitting on the wall.” The expectation, according to several of the female superintendents, is that women should be less vocal in the superintendents’ meetings. Hannah stated, “When you talk about educational leadership and the female voice, we still have a long way to go.”

The female participants reported women’s personality traits, dispositions, and practices were typically carefully scrutinized based upon societal gender-specific stereotypes. In some cases, the female participants themselves critiqued and judged other women’s behaviors as emotional and inappropriate for professional settings. Rose judged her female predecessor as extremely emotional due to the daily practice of having staff members hold hands and pray each morning. While this may have been an inappropriate (and illegal) practice for any public school leader to enact, I recorded in my Field Notes:
Rose’s judgment of her predecessor, as being emotional, simply because she is a woman, was perplexing to me. I have worked for numerous men who started meetings with prayer and never related the appropriateness of this practice to be remotely connected to gender. I wonder if Rose would have perceived this situation in the same manner if her predecessor had been a man who kicked off the day with prayer.

Rose also perceived the importance of women becoming comfortable and familiar with discussing sports so they have topics to discuss with their male colleagues. She explained that male superintendents feel uncomfortable trying to identify topics to discuss with their female superintendent colleagues. According to Rose:

Just like we do in any group we enter, we try to get them to feel comfortable and talk about what they are interested in. It’s the same way with a group of men superintendents. I’m not expecting we’re gonna’ talk about what’s on Pinterest.

Rose went on to blame women for being oversensitive and overreacting to some of the “off color jokes.” She stated women should learn more about sports and men’s interests.

Female superintendents reported gender-specific stereotypes related to perceived strengths and weaknesses impacted how they were treated when dealing with maintenance issues or other areas typically associated with men. This offended a couple of the women, and they considered it to be a significant issue. Beth described a situation of this nature:

People treat me differently. I have to deal with maintenance issues and custodial issues, and I know they view me in a certain way, and they also handle me in a certain way because of that. One of the first things I can remember having to
stand up and do, we were working on the softball field, and there was an issue, and our maintenance crew, I didn’t feel like they could handle it at this point, and we needed to bring in somebody to help with the dirt work. And as I’m standing there talking to the dirt work guy and to our maintenance supervisor, he [the maintenance supervisor] gets into this thing with the other guy, in front of me, and so I had to calm him down. I was out there with all the guys, I’ve got the high school principal, the athletic director, and these guys, and I know nothing about dirt and dirt work. Don’t know. Don’t wanta’ know. Don’t care. Just want it done. I just want the softball field to be done like it’s supposed to be done. But I feel like they’re posturing and wanting to see how I would intervene. So I did, and I told him [the maintenance supervisor], “Absolutely unacceptable. I will talk to you later.” And I told the dirt guy, “I’m sorry. I hate that happened. It won’t happen again.” I don’t think he [the maintenance supervisor] would’ve done it if it had been only the guys out there.

Other female superintendents recognized their own weaknesses in specific areas and stated they made sure they were included in the dialogue related to these types of issues, but they trusted the individuals in those positions to know more than they do on these particular issues.

In general, all of the female superintendents in the study agreed that gender stereotypes remained a significant hindrance to women accessing the superintendency in Mississippi. In addition, they perceived these stereotypes as directly impacting the degree to which they experienced success as superintendents. Ultimately, female
superintendents’ leadership practices, dispositions, attitudes, personality traits, and
decisions were more closely scrutinized than those of male superintendents.

*Good Ole Boys’ Club.* Another external hindrance reported consistently by the
participants was the continuing presence of the Good Ole Boys’ Club. In general, the
majority of the female superintendents who participated in the study reported that the
Good Ole Boy system remained a significant barrier for women in Mississippi. Most of
the female superintendents who previously reported no barriers for women attempting to
access the superintendency in Mississippi agreed the Good Ole Boy system remains
intact.

In addition, Vicki explained, “Particularly, in this state, we still operate off the
White Good Ole Boy mentality.” Vicki described the racial and gender inequity on the
board of the Mississippi High School Athletic Association (MHSAA), and stated the
representation on the board has historically been comprised of primarily White males.
Yet, throughout the state of Mississippi, coaches, both male and female, of multiple
races, are represented. In addition, Vicki discussed the leadership board of the
Mississippi Association of School Superintendents, and explained, “Until the last couple
of years, there were no female superintendents on the board.” Vicki challenged the
MASS president on this issue, and eventually was added to the MASS Board of
Directors. In general, men continued to lead most of Mississippi’s professional
educational leadership organizations, and as a result, men largely impact numerous
educational decisions.

The female superintendents reported incidences with the Good Ole Boys’ Club
that impacted them both personally and professionally. In some cases, these interactions
often occurred overtly, but in other instances, they happened in an indirect, discrete manner. Joyce, an elected superintendent, provided several recent instances when she encountered the Good Ole Boys’ Club. For example, when attending a regional meeting representing multiple counties in Mississippi, she was the only female with 13 men on the Board of Directors.

Joyce stated:

> It’s not something you can really call them out on or anything, but it’s just something you feel, and when you hear the conversations at the next table, you become really aware of the fact that you are definitely in the minority.

When she was elected as superintendent, Joyce encountered a gentleman she had known for a number of years, and he said, “Girly, I’m so proud of you.” She explained he seemed very shocked that she won the election, and she believed his reaction would have been completely different if her male opponent had won. Joyce also described incidences when she attended large meetings with a significant number of superintendents, the men went together to have lunch and excluded the women, which perpetuated the continuing presence of the Good Ole Boys.

According to Tammy, her previous superintendent told her she should not become superintendent. She explained:

> Although for all of those years, I had done his job, he would tell people, “Yeah, I don’t do anything. She does all my work for me.” But he still felt that it [the superintendent] needed to be a male. And he even told me who the person needed to be…Even to that point, a person who knew my work, who knew what I could do, I guess he believed that was just the way it needed to be.
Tammy concluded by stating that men were more likely to secure a superintendent’s position, regardless of their qualifications. Generally, Tammy also believed men remained in the superintendent’s position, regardless of the degree to which they were successful in leading the district.

The female superintendents from the northern part of the state reported a strong presence of the Good Ole Boys’ Club. Rose stated, “When I lived in the Delta, there definitely was a Good Ole Boys’ Club, and I know there still is; they give each other jobs that they get fired from, then they go ahead and hire them again in another place.” The female superintendents also communicated an increasing lack of tolerance for the continuing presence of the Good Ole Boys’ Club. On challenging the Good Ole Boy system, Barbara stated:

They don’t know how to take me. And I think that throws them off a little bit. I’m not one of them. I didn’t grow up in this town with all the rest of them. I think there are a lot of places where a lot of what goes down gets done at the Good Ole Boys’ Club.

Beth discussed the lack of networking options for her, as a female superintendent. She explained:

There is no network for me. There’s definitely a Good Ole Boys’ system, and it’s a group of White males. One told me, “This is a great group of guys. They’ll help you out.” No, they won’t, and no, they don’t. They pretty much only call me to recommend someone for a job. It is the Good Ole Boy system, and I don’t really have the energy or the patience with that very much at all.
Even though most of the participants reported the Good Ole Boys’ Club as an ever-present obstacle in women’s efforts to move into higher leadership opportunities such as the superintendency, the women communicated an increasing lack of tolerance for this barrier.

According to Renee:

The Good Ole Boys look out for each other. They only want the Good Ole Boys. They think only the Good Ole Boys can get anything done. I have been in meetings, and I think they are on their way out. I think these days, people are just not willing to put up with the Good Ole Boys as much as they used to run and control everything. There are too many things that are in place that if the Good Ole Boys aren’t careful, they will have a lawsuit against them.

In contrast to all of the other female participants, JoAnn, a superintendent from the coastal area, denied having any experiences with the Good Ole Boys’ Club. In fact, she emphasized the large representation of women in top leadership positions within her school district and stated, “I have had no experience with the Good Ole Boys’ Club. In my district, it could be said that we have a Good Ole Girls’ Club.”

_Glass ceiling._ The final external barrier consistently reported by the female superintendents was the glass ceiling. Only a few of the women were familiar with the term “glass ceiling,” but as I explained this term, several perceived that society, as a whole, expect women to be satisfied with the progress made in their rise to top leadership opportunities, including the superintendency. Beth stated that many individuals, both men and women, made specific comments to her, as she pursued the superintendency. These included, “You really don’t want to be the superintendent. You want to be an assistant
superintendent in charge of curriculum and instruction.” Beth added, “There’s definitely a glass ceiling, and there’s an attitude that we should be happy with what we’ve got.”

Other women stated that women’s only hope of breaking through the glass ceiling into a female superintendency in Mississippi was for them to have significantly greater credentials than men applying for that same position. Ann stated, “When all the factors [credentials for superintendent applicants] are equal, the male will likely get the position every single time.” Several women perceived the questions included in the superintendent’s interview process regarding their ability to juggle the responsibilities of wife, mother, or caretaker, and demands of the superintendency, as an example of the continuing presence of the glass ceiling. Hannah stated, “I don’t think men are usually asked that question.” Interestingly enough, none of the women questioned the legalities associated with these types of questions as a part of the superintendents’ interview process. In fact, they seemed to accept the practice of being quizzed on their abilities to handle both roles – mother and superintendent – as one that is unfair, but not necessarily inappropriate or illegal.

Following my explanation of what the term “glass ceiling” meant, many of the female superintendents stated they did not see this as a barrier. Vicki stated, “I guess I’m just the kind of person that if you set out to do something, and that is your goal, you work toward achieving that goal, you reach the ceiling, when you reach that goal.” Others stated that some women have overcome this barrier by being determined, pressing forward, and refusing to accept its presence. Renee concluded:

The glass ceiling is there because there are Good Ole Boys who wanta’ keep us from those positions. It is there, but because women think about it, many don’t
even try. My take on this is you have to pursue what you want, and if it’s for you, you’re gonna’ get it. Nothing in the world is going to be able to keep women from going as high as they can go, but they’re never going to get it if they don’t pursue it. So, women can’t hold themselves back even though it does exist, it will never be broken unless we break it. The more women who seek the superintendency, the more people will see that women are just as capable, just as intelligent, and can get the job done. We just have to keep chipping away at the glass ceiling until it’s gone.

In summary, the interview data with 14 female superintendents revealed their perceptions related to the impact of hindrances, both internal and external, on their success as superintendents in Mississippi. Internal hindrances included impact on female superintendents’ families, which included the challenges of coexisting roles as superintendent and mother, struggles associated with the female superintendents and their husbands constantly shifting back and forth between non-traditional and traditional gender roles, women’s lack of aspirations, and the “no problem problem.”

External hindrances included politics, including female superintendents’ interactions with both local and state politics, gender-related stereotypes associated with perceptions linked to women’s capacity to perform the job of superintendent, perceptions of women as leaders, and perceptions associated with female leaders’ traits, dispositions, and practices. Other external hindrances reported in the data related to the continuing presence of the Good Ole Boys’ Club and the challenges women faced in breaking through the glass ceiling.
Facilitators for Women’s Success as Superintendent

For the purposes of this study, facilitators referred to the emergent themes that positively contributed to the success of the participating female superintendents. The facilitators that emerged for this study were related to the female superintendents’ belief systems, including the impact of family in developing the women’s inherent self-worth and work ethic. In addition, the women repeatedly cited examples, both indirectly and directly, of handling numerous crises with grace; therefore, I referred to them as “Steel Magnolias,” and provide further explanation in the section that follows. Other facilitators contributing to the success of the female superintendents included leadership practices, such as shared leadership, leading as teachers, servant leadership, relationship builders, and communicators. Also facilitating the women’s success was their focus on students, expertise in curriculum and instruction, and access to mentors.

Belief Systems

*Impacted by family.* Roughly half of the female superintendents directly or indirectly credited their family members as major contributors in developing their work ethic and sense of self-worth as they pursued and served as superintendents. Ann stated that when she was a child, her own mother worked tirelessly, as a single parent, to provide food and clothing that was needed in their family. As Ann approached adulthood, her mother became ill and was forced to move in with Ann and her young daughter. Ann stated:

> Just like when I was a little girl, my mother and I became a team. Without her help and pushing me to achieve more, I would never have been able to have
enough courage to put myself out there. The barriers were challenging. It has been hectic, but it would have been impossible without her pushing me, pushing me.

Over the years, we acted as a team. If I had not had her, I would never have been able to move up the ranks professionally and now be in this position.

Even further, Ann credited her mother’s influence on developing her own “dogged persistence” as the one attribute that carried her through the extremely challenging events, related to personnel and financial decisions that transpired when Ann first moved into the superintendency.

JoAnn stated her father’s work ethic and servant attitude impacted her greatly, and these same qualities helped her to be successful as superintendent. JoAnn’s father was a former superintendent for 33 years in the same district where she was serving at the time of the study (and where she previously served for 12 years). JoAnn shared that it was her father who taught her the value of hard work and the importance of developing relationships with students, parents, and community members of her school district. She recalled spending summers at central office creating bus route schedules, conducting fixed assets inventories, and many other tedious and laborious tasks. Also, by the time JoAnn became superintendent, her father had already retired. Since JoAnn was taking on all the responsibilities associated with the superintendency, and her husband was a principal at that time, JoAnn counted on her father for help with their own children. JoAnn emphasized that what impacted her most, however, was her father’s constant encouragement to keep students at the forefront of her mind when making decisions. The women’s belief systems were significantly influenced by their families. These strong beliefs and the women’s work ethic represented a facilitator for success.
Steel magnolias. In a popular 1989 movie, Steel Magnolias, the actresses characterized the female characters as steel magnolias, because women were “as delicate as a flower, and as strong as steel” (Stark & Ross, 1989). The female superintendents reminded me of the characters in the movie, Steel Magnolias, for many reasons. First, the women encountered numerous barriers and challenges in a profession largely dominated by men. Also, their passion for education was evidenced in numerous ways, including their work ethic. Examples of the female superintendents’ strength permeated throughout the interviews for all 14 female superintendents as they described their work ethic and ability to handle both personal and professional obligations, even when they were faced with extremely difficult situations. Both of the elected superintendents talked about the hours, days, and weeks they campaigned to prepare for the election. They reported going door-to-door to speak to individuals throughout the community and attended every possible public community event to get their message out, on top of their regular home- and work-related responsibilities. Joyce stated that her husband and two sons provided significant moral support during the campaign season, and they also drove her around as she “knocked on doors from one end of the county to the other trying to get the message out.” However, both women indicated the entire process for seeking election for the superintendency became their primary focus for the time in which they were seeking election, and they remained diligent about keeping up with their other responsibilities.

In addition to the elected female superintendents, the appointed female superintendents also reported a history of working long hours, even prior to their move to the superintendency. When they talked about the jobs they had before they became superintendents, most of them indirectly alluded to a pattern of working long hours,
regardless of what position they held. Lynn detailed her work habits years before being named superintendent, “I was doing federal programs, MSIS, testing, all of the entries and withdrawals for the elementary school, K-8, working 14-16 hour days.” Tammy, Ann, Morgan, Sarah, Beth, Lynn, and Nancy referred to windows of time when they were working full-time as teachers or administrators, handling the traditional responsibilities of being a wife and mother, and taking graduate school courses toward an advanced degree. Ann simply stated, “Well, I’m a workaholic.”

Not only were these female superintendents hard workers, they valued this quality in their employees as well. For example, Lynn stated, “People that will work the 14 and 16 hour days on a salary, to make sure the job is not only done, but it's done right, those people are few and far between now among our colleagues.” Nancy shared, “I don’t know if there’s been a day that I’ve been home by 5:00 since I’ve been here.” She reported that when she first moved into the superintendency and teachers were uncomfortable sharing specific concerns during regular working hours, she agreed to meet with them at 9:00 on some evenings. In addition, she stated:

You have certain deadlines you have to meet, and I had a non-renewal a few weeks ago, and all the information had to be pulled together. I think I went home at 3:30 in the morning. Whatever it takes, I will get it done.

In addition to the women consistently demonstrating a strong work ethic, many of them shared their experiences in dealing with both personal- and professional-related crises during their superintendency. Both Morgan and JoAnn, superintendents from the Gulf Coast region, described the struggles they encountered during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. JoAnn explained that over half of the students’ families in her district and 25% of
the teaching staff lost their homes, as a result of Hurricane Katrina. As the superintendent, she felt the school district’s role in rebuilding the community was extremely important. JoAnn worked with the governor’s office and FEMA to set up a “community” located around the central office, with approximately 40 travel trailers to house teachers’ families. In doing so, this enabled children whose homes were still livable to return to school. JoAnn explained that because so many teachers were living in the travel trailers, they also needed a place to do their family’s laundry. JoAnn partnered with a church in California and had a small building built in the vicinity of the travel trailers. As I recorded in my Field Notes, “JoAnn became emotional several times throughout this portion of the interview as she recalled these experiences.” She stated, “We took care of their needs because, until their needs, a place to live and a safe place for their children, were met, they couldn’t worry about teaching.” JoAnn went on to talk of many more struggles throughout that school year due to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Morgan echoed many of JoAnn’s stories related to the period of time following Katrina. Even though Morgan was still a principal at that time, she shared similar experiences of hardship, devastation, and guiding her staff and school community to a place, both physically and emotionally, to enable them to move forward. In addition to the women’s commitment to working extremely long hours, they also demonstrated softness and a significant capacity to lead from their hearts, truly representative of a Steel Magnolia.

Even though the female superintendents’ willingness to work long hours and handle significant crises, at whatever cost, was considered a facilitator for their success, these attributes may have also contributed to their own isolation and lack of opportunities
for interacting with other superintendents. During my interview with Ann, we discussed the challenges for female superintendents related to networking, and she stated, “Women are too busy working. We don’t even have time to network, we are working.” Therefore, one of facilitators for the success of the female superintendents could also represent a barrier, possibly resulting in further isolation from both male and female colleagues.

Leadership Practices

The data revealed several common leadership practices that served as facilitators for the female superintendents’ success. The women demonstrated practices associated with shared and servant leadership, leading as teachers, relationship builders, communicators, focusing on students, and demonstrating expertise in curriculum and instruction.

Shared leadership. One of the most prevalent themes that emerged during analysis of the interview data related to the female superintendents’ leadership practices. Throughout the interviews with all 14 women, each woman directly and/or indirectly described actions and decisions typically associated with a shared leadership philosophy (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Helgeson, 1990; Hoyt, 2007; Ostos, 2012; Palladino, et al., 2007. In doing so, the women repeatedly discussed their constant dialogue with each of the stakeholder groups throughout the school district – parents, community members, local and state politicians, district and school level administrators, and students. When they referred to stakeholders, the women typically included themselves within the overall group and used “we” rather than “I.” Establishing a cohesive team approach was also a theme that permeated each of the 14 interviews with the female superintendents. Hannah stated, “One of my core tenets, as a leader, has been to empower others. I don’t want
people to say they did something because I said to do it. I want them to do it because it’s what’s right for our kids. And it’s what’s right for our system.”

Most of the female superintendents explicitly stated they established a leadership team, comprised of district level leaders (athletic director, maintenance supervisor, chief financial officer, assistant superintendent, principals, and so on) to discuss concerns impacting the entire district. The women referred to this stakeholder group as their “cabinet” or “leadership team.” These groups met regularly, discussed issues relating to the entire district, collaboratively worked to make decisions as needed, and served as a messenger to the personnel for whom they were responsible.

Joyce emphasized she trusted those who hold district level leadership positions to know and execute their job responsibilities well. Joyce typically led the district level leadership meetings, but her assistant superintendent planned and directed principal meetings. She stated:

It would be ridiculous for me to attempt to lead these meetings when she [the assistant superintendent] is the one who is directly working with the principals daily and has a much deeper understanding of the topics that need to be covered. I have no problem counting on her to lead these meetings. I trust her to do her job and to do it well.

Hannah described the various leadership teams within her district. These included the cabinet, comprised of the two assistant superintendents and major department heads, the leadership team, which included the cabinet and all principals, and the school board. As we discussed this further, Hannah added that she also established a Superintendent’s Advisory Council, where student representatives from across all schools, met with her
regularly to discuss their concerns. Hannah stated that the students’ input had resulted in several very positive changes throughout the district.

In addition to demonstrating a shared, collaborative leadership approach with school district employees, the female superintendents used the same approach with community stakeholders. Ann emphasized the importance of bringing in “the naysayers,” those who were generally disgruntled, outspoken, and complained openly about the school district. When she was named superintendent, the district’s accountability rating was very low, causing the local media to consistently “bash” the district’s decisions. In developing the decision-making team for necessary changes, Ann stated, “I started getting the community people, the few that would come. I could not ostracize the naysayers.” Instead, she met with these people, listened to concerns and ideas, and invited them to partner with the school district. As a result, Ann was successful in garnering the support of many individuals who previously publicly criticized the school district.

The female superintendents emphasized the importance of building capacity within their leadership team and throughout their school districts with the goal of empowering all stakeholders. Vicki stated, “If people need to come to me for every small decision, then I don’t need them. I need somebody that can take responsibility and run with it.” The female superintendents reported they sought input from “the trenches” and were intentional in working to prepare their administrators for future career opportunities. The women viewed themselves as modeling these types of collaborative, empowering behaviors for administrators who were under their leadership. The female superintendents
encouraged principals to use the shared leadership practices in building capacity within their own schools in order to develop teacher leadership.

Several of the women stated they valued risk-takers and expected their principals to lead the implementation of new innovative programs or instructional practices that resulted in increased student learning. However, the women also recognized their own responsibility, as the district leader, and were unafraid to step in to provide support as needed. Renee stated, “I am fully aware that, as superintendent, I am the bottom line.” Overall, the shared leadership style of all 14 female superintendents in this study positively impacted their tenure and served as a facilitator for the women’s success.

Servant leadership. In addition to a shared leadership approach, the women perceived their role, as superintendent, as one of service to their school districts, including stakeholder groups within and outside of the school districts themselves. They consistently diverted attention away from themselves and toward the success of others, a practice that represented a facilitator for their own success as superintendents. Renee summarized her own thoughts regarding women, in general, and their perspective on serving in top leadership roles, such as the superintendency, “Women don’t really see themselves as having ‘power’. They view their role as that of a servant and a facilitator.”

Leaders as teachers. All of the female superintendents demonstrated both shared and servant leadership practices. In addition, most of the female superintendents previously served in various leadership capacities during their tenure as classroom teachers. Sarah stated:

I probably would’ve been called a “lead teacher” because they would ask me to do in-service trainings and go to these meetings and come back and present…I
always wanted to know firsthand. I didn’t want to have to depend on somebody else to come and tell me what needs to be really done.

Lynn also shared early experiences of her teaching career when the principal asked her to research alternate scheduling options for the school. She stated:

He gave me three books, sent me to two districts, then I developed some teams, and I took them to visit the schools. I formulated a four-by-four schedule for our high school, and I hand scheduled every student so that he could prove to the superintendent at that time that it would work.

While many of the female superintendents experienced leadership opportunities as teachers, they continued to perceive themselves, now superintendents, as a teacher. This leader-as-teacher perception positively facilitated the women’s success as superintendents. Beth emphasized, “You’re not gonna’ get rid of anyone until you have come along beside them and helped them get better.” Sarah stated she perceived herself as the “master teacher of the district” and worked to educate both teachers and principals. Nancy emphasized one of her major roles, as superintendent, was to ensure that principals received relevant and meaningful professional development with an intended outcome of developing strong leaders. Barbara echoed this as her primary goal, as well, and stated, “I see myself as a principal’s superintendent.” Beth stated:

If a student is struggling with a specific concept or skill, I expect teachers to remediate, work with them, and keep doing this until the student “gets it.” It’s the same thing for me. As superintendent, I have the responsibility to provide the very same intense instruction in order to help the employee – whether it’s a teacher, principal, or whomever.
Relationship builders. Another common practice associated with the female superintendents related to their emphasis on the importance of building relationships. All of the women directly or indirectly referred to the significance of building and cultivating relationships with all stakeholders as a significant focus of their work. Some of the women were serving as superintendents in their hometowns, where lifelong relationships were credited as a facilitator of the women’s success as superintendents. Lynn stated, “It’s the same with adults as it is with children. You have to establish a relationship in order to be heard.” She shared that the “investment” she made in the community as cheerleader coach, Sunday School teacher, and so on helped to give her credibility within the community. Ann stated the various “generational” relationships she cultivated, due to growing up in the town where she served as superintendent, helped her to understand when stakeholders experienced concerns related to the school district. Joyce, one of the elected superintendents, attributed her election win to the strong relationships she developed prior to running for office.

The women serving in districts that were not their “home towns,” also reported the value of relationships as a significant component of their leadership approach as superintendent. Barbara, a superintendent who relocated to the district where she served, reported, “Relationships are important. I am very transparent. I have an open door policy. I make it a practice to listen. I do not like secrets. I try to treat everyone the same.” Four of the White female superintendents reported intentionally reaching out to the African Americans in their community to build relationships. Two were invited and accepted the opportunity to present the Sunday message at local Black churches. Both women stated
their willingness to do this resulted in many positive relationships, and ultimately impacted the degree of their success as superintendents.

The interviews for this study were conducted during the state legislative session. As a result, all of the women referred to their relationships with state legislators. While several expressed significant frustration toward the legislators for inadequate support of public education in Mississippi, a few of the female superintendents discussed the importance of building sustained relationships with these individuals, as opposed to only contacting them during the legislative session. These few women invited area politicians to multiple events in their school districts throughout the school year, and often, the legislators actually attended. Rather than an annual dialogue during the legislative session, the female superintendents who established and maintained ongoing relationships reported strong relationships with their legislators. As a result, the women stated they felt comfortable calling to ask the legislators to explain their stance on specific votes and to express their own views. These women placed relationship building with the politicians as a priority and chose to look beyond political differences.

According to Lynn:

Those men that are my age and older that are at the capitol still need to know that somebody cares about what they think. They just get lost in the argument. It turns into something that it wasn't meant to be and there's this artificially created enmity, because these people are my friends when they come home.

Some of the female superintendents emphasized the importance of making relationship building a priority when first entering office. Nancy, one of the elected superintendents, reported that her staff initially resisted her as the superintendent, but she
worked to develop relationships, earning their respect by working hard. Several of the female superintendents also stressed the significance of connecting with other male superintendents even if the women had to initiate the contact. They emphasized the likelihood of establishing connections was greater if women simply took the first steps in connecting. Overall, the women stressed the value of getting to know “your people,” understanding their concerns, frustrations, and how they respond to various situations. They also stated it was critical for female superintendents to strive to look through the lens of the stakeholders and attempt to understand their perspective. The female superintendents perceived the importance of building and sustaining relationships with all stakeholders as a facilitator for a successful tenure as superintendent.

Communicators. In addition to focusing on building and sustaining relationships with stakeholders, all of the female superintendents directly or indirectly referred to the value of communicating as a facilitator for success as superintendent. Sarah stated, “The main thing that creates problems is lack of communication.” The female participants cited multiple references when they engaged in open dialogue with community members, legislators, administrators, teachers, students, parents, various groups of stakeholders, and so on. They also emphasized the importance of ongoing communication with the school board. In some cases, the women used specific strategies, such as a “Monday Memo,” emails, or newsletters to provide regular updates to the board.

All of the women frequently referred to the importance of clearly communicating expectations to all stakeholders in order to establish and maintain positive relationships. According to Renee, “People need to know what you expect.” Barbara stressed the importance of straightforward communication between herself and stakeholders. In
describing the culture she established within her district leadership team, related to communication, she stated, “There isn’t anything that they can’t say. They do not have to agree with me, but when we leave, we are on the same page about what we’re going to do.” Lynn also emphasized the importance of sharing positive news, stating, “Tell your story, and make it good news. There is already enough negative news.”

The female superintendents considered listening equally as important as articulating expectations. Sarah emphasized:

A lot of times when there’s an issue, whether it’s a parent or a teacher, I find that they just want to be heard. They want to tell you how they feel and whether you act on it or not, it’s up to you. I consider listening as one of my better traits. I ask them for solutions, and I listen to the solutions they propose. I truly listen.

The female superintendents who participated in this study stated the importance of clear communication and careful listening as facilitators for their success.

Student-focused. In addition to specific attributes common to the female superintendents, they also consistently demonstrated a student-focused approach to the leadership of their school districts. The majority of the female superintendents directly referred to their focus on students and student learning as the primary driver for their leadership. Sarah stressed:

Being a superintendent is a lot of work, and you better have your heart in it, and you better have a backbone. The bottom line is we are here for the students. In my opinion, I want to take that child as far as he can go, and sometimes we lose sight of that with all the other stuff.
Throughout my interview with Hannah, she continually referenced her focus on the students as “clients.” She described the Superintendent’s Advisory Council and their role in making big decisions that significantly impacted the entire study body. She stated:

Their feedback to me, as our clients, has been the most insightful because if they aren’t feeling as though they are being challenged with the services we’re providing, then we are not providing the right services.

The women also reported making instructional decisions, related to personnel or curriculum, because the decisions were in the best interest of students. All of the female superintendents stated they attended as many school-related events as possible and that students expected to see them there. Ann stated, “I’m in the zone when I’m with students at the schools.” The female superintendents’ focus on students represented a facilitator for success.

*Curriculum and instruction expertise.* While all of the female superintendents perceived their student-focused approach as a facilitator contributing to their success, most of the women also reported that curriculum and instruction was their area of expertise. Only two of the 14 of the female superintendents, Vicki and Nancy, identified their strengths as handling district financial matters. When Nancy attended the annual supervisors’ meeting and confronted them with a request for increased millage (a tax that applies to the assessed value of real estate within the community which significantly contributes to local funding for school districts), the male supervisors were surprised that she knew all about how this process worked. Vicki also reported her strengths, as superintendent, were dealing with personnel and finance matters.
The remainder of the female superintendents, an overwhelming majority, identified curriculum and instruction as their area of expertise and their “passion.” Possessing a level of expertise related to curriculum and instruction positively facilitated the female superintendents’ success. The women provided multiple examples of their involvement and level of expertise in the area of curriculum and instruction. For example, Rose emphasized the successful implementation of Early Head Start in her district during her tenure:

We know where it starts, and we know if we don’t get them then, it doesn’t matter what we end up with at the high school. I get tired of people talking about the high school being the “bell-cow” [meaning the high school is the example school for other schools in the district to follow] of the district. No, it’s my preK-2nd grade school.

The female superintendents stated they spent significant amounts of time in schools each day. Several of them named specific instructional weaknesses within one or more of their schools. They referred to “understanding by design” and “differentiated instruction” as they discussed specific professional development sessions. In addition, they expressed concerns related to instructional issues associated with implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The women expressed their worries for teachers’ stress level related to changes in Mississippi’s state testing program and overall accountability expectations.

Several of the women discussed the use of data as the driver for instructional decisions in their district. Hannah reported she carried her district’s scorecard around as
her “Bible.” Sarah shared her frustration related to inadequate availability of data that would have allowed state and national comparisons. In my Field Notes, I stated:

It was clear these women exhibited a clear, deep understanding of curriculum and instruction, along with the expectations for the assessment. Not only that, they understood the challenges that teachers and principals faced.

**Mentors – Mixed Reviews**

The female superintendents expressed mixed opinions related to the impact of mentors on facilitating their success. Two of the 14 women stated they had no mentor as they moved up the education ranks to the superintendency. Six women reported having a female mentor throughout their professional careers. The remaining six women reported the presence of a male mentor.

Of the six female superintendents mentored by male superintendents, all shared experiences related to their mentors facilitating opportunities that ultimately allowed access to other professional opportunities. These opportunities eventually led to the women’s promotion to the superintendency. Only one of these six women shared stories related to her male mentor guiding, teaching, and counseling her as she strived to grow in leadership skills.

Lynn stated that her male mentor constantly provided opportunities for her to learn the many responsibilities associated with the superintendency. She also admitted he often used sexist comments in their conversations. According to Lynn, “I was put off by it, but after getting to know him better, I knew that he didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just, that’s how he was brought up.” Lynn reported that her mentor always gave her credit for the work that she completed and “marinated the board to transition me into the
superintendency.” Barbara stated that her male mentor provided multiple opportunities for learning by involving her in a variety of responsibilities during the time she was at central office. She emphasized, “He made sure I learned how budgets work, and I learned how programs work. I had the opportunity to do a variety of things that really made a difference in my success.”

Of the six female superintendents who reported women as their mentors, four stated their mentors currently remain an ongoing support system for them. They also indicated their female mentors served as teachers and cheerleaders along their professional journey and significantly impacted the women’s success. Morgan attributed her entry into administration as a direct result of her female mentor, stating:

She saw something in me. She led by example, and she held people accountable. If you didn’t reach the goal you were supposed to reach, you had to explain why you didn’t reach it. And she put us through a lot of good trainings…She put me in just a lot of the right places at the right time.

Beth reported having several examples of leadership, both male and female, throughout her career, but she stated most of the lessons she learned from them were “what not to do.” Ann stated that the previous female superintendent who served just prior to her own promotion to superintendent, exited under significant public conflict and negativism within the community. As a result, the former female superintendent believed that serving as Ann’s mentor would have been detrimental to success as the new superintendent. Of the 14 female superintendents represented in this study, most of them reported the presence of a mentor who positively impacted their success in accessing the superintendency and in serving as superintendent in Mississippi. However, it is important
to note that the women reported differences in the type of mentoring experiences depending upon whether their mentor was a male or female. In general, those with male mentors were afforded opportunities by these men. The men were placed in the right place at the right time. The female superintendents who reported having a female mentor echoed the same experiences of being placed in specific settings, gaining access to advanced opportunities. However, the female superintendents with female mentors also emphasized the continuing presence of their mentors, long after their original mentor/mentee relationship began. Essentially, the male mentors served as gatekeepers, offering the women an open gate and access to greater advancements in their careers. The female mentors, however, provided a more ongoing, embedded type of mentorship, resulting in most of the female superintendents receiving continuing support by their female mentors. Regardless whether male or female mentors mentored the women, the presence of a mentor was perceived as a facilitator in the women’s success as superintendents.

Summary

This chapter presented data resulting from interviews with 14 female superintendents in Mississippi’s public schools. The analysis of the data was reported under two overarching themes, hindrances and facilitators, both of these encompassing various factors impacting women’s degree of success as female superintendents in Mississippi. These broad themes were used for further analysis of the data, resulting in the emergence of the following recurrent sub-themes. Hindrances, factors negatively impacting women’s degree of success as superintendents in Mississippi, were organized into external and internal hindrances. As the data were reported, internal hindrances such
as impact on family, women’s lack of aspirations, and the “no problem problem” were discussed. In addition, the data related to external hindrances such as politics, gender stereotypes, the Good Ole Boys’ Club, and the glass ceiling were also presented. Data related to facilitators, factors positively impacting women’s degree of success as Mississippi superintendents, were also discussed. As the data were reported, facilitators such as female superintendents’ belief systems, leadership practices, and mentors were identified. In addition, another facilitator of the women’s success compared the women to “steel magnolias” representing the strength, grace, and courage the female superintendents continually exhibited, as was evidenced in the interview data.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This final chapter contains a summary and discussion related to the research findings. In addition, the findings were applied to feminist theory, feminist poststructuralist, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks. This chapter also includes an overview of the importance of this study to the field of educational leadership, including recommendations for future research, implications related to policy development, and suggestions for practice. A brief overview of the limitations of the study is also provided. The chapter concludes with my own final reflection, as I complete this journey.

The purpose of this final chapter was to expand upon the research findings and consider the broader implications of the experiences of the 14 female superintendents who participated in this study, with an over-arching goal of understanding the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi public schools. The findings from this qualitative study added to the body of research from previous studies investigating the phenomenon of the low numbers of female superintendents in Mississippi (Norwood, 2005; Page-Hite, 2004). The research questions, which guided this study, allowed me to investigate perceived barriers encountered by Mississippi’s female superintendents, as well as study the perceived attitudes, dispositions, and practices of women currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi.
Application of Theoretical Frameworks

A combination of feminist theory, feminist postructuralist, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks were used as a lens through which the interview data were analyzed. Based on feminist theory, male and female superintendents experience this leadership role, the superintendency, in a completely different manner (Flax, 1979; Frye, 1990; Tong, 1998; Wheat, 2012; Wood, 2009). Therefore, undergirding the discussion of the data with feminist theory, in general, provided a logical means of distinguishing unique and different ways that men and women interacted with the superintendency. In addition, feminist theory assumes the oppression of women and the existence of a patriarchal structure, where men possess power over women (Flax, 1979; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009). Since this study investigated the ongoing phenomenon of the underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi, feminist theory provided a lens for me, as the researcher, to reflect upon the superintendency itself, as a power structure within the field of education, which continues to perpetuate the cyclical nature of men having power over women.

The data that were collected in this study resulted from interviews with 14 female superintendents in Mississippi. These women, as the direct data source, shared their perceptions related to the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. Aligned with a feminist postructuralist theoretical framework, the interview data provided a lens into these women’s internalized beliefs regarding gender-role expectations, along with a review of the challenges faced by women who moved into positions previously perceived as male roles (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Barrett, 2005; DiPalma & Ferguson, 2006; Dressman, 2008; Grogan, 2008; Wood, 2009). As the female superintendents shared their
stories related to their own perceptions of barriers within a culture where men continued to have power over women, feminist standpoint theory also provided another layer through which these women’s experiences were reviewed (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005; Wood, 2009).

Summary of the Study by Research Question

The purpose of this section was to discuss the findings of the study resulting from analyses of the qualitative interviews and my own field notes. The interpretations of the findings and recommendations were discussed using a combination of feminist theory, feminist postructuralist, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks. The findings were then categorized according to common and recurrent themes which emerged throughout the study. The discussion was organized around the following two research questions:

1. What were the perceptions of women who were currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting in Mississippi regarding barriers to the superintendency?

2. What were the perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi?

Discussion Related to Research Question One

The following section provides an overview of the discussion related to research question, which asked, “What were the perceptions of women who were currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting in Mississippi regarding barriers to the superintendency?”
In response to research question one, the following broad themes emerged as barriers for the female superintendents: (1) gendered expectations for women, (2) the Good Old Boys’ Club, and (3) the glass ceiling. Data from the interview transcripts and field notes, related to barriers for women currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi, were then organized into (1) internal hindrances, obstacles or challenges that were self-imposed or assumed by female superintendents, and (2) external hindrances, challenges that were beyond the control of the female superintendents. The following section provides a discussion of the data findings, and is organized by (1) each of the broad themes, (2) each theme’s alignment to internal or external hindrances, and (3) integration and application of the data related to theory.

*Gendered Expectations for Women*

*Gendered expectations as wife and mother.* The gendered expectations for the female superintendents represented both internal and external hindrances or barriers. According to feminist poststructuralists, women’s traditional roles, as wives, mothers, and/or grandmothers, places them within a discourse historically associated with caring for children, helping with homework, carpooling the children to after-school events, grocery shopping and cooking the family’s meals, cleaning, running errands, and so on (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Barrett, 2005). In spite of the fact that these women were successful in accessing the superintendency, they continued to interact with the role of superintendent, as it was traditionally defined within the male-dominated discourse. In the traditionally male-dominated discourse of the superintendency, however, men were held in high regard for working long hours and demonstrating a dominant take-charge attitude. In addition, the male superintendents’ wives historically assumed the role
generally associated with mother and wife and supported male superintendents. Without a shift in the discourse associated with the superintendency, women have been forced to assume a dual gendered existence, both at home and at work.

The female superintendents who participated in this study represented varying family structures. Eight of the participants were married at the time of the study. Three of the women were widowed, and three were divorced. All 14 female superintendents were mothers; however, only seven of the women’s children still lived at home during the time the interviews were conducted. In general, the practices of the 14 female superintendents mirrored the challenges feminist postructuralists described when women attempt to interact with multiple, competing discourses (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Barrett, 2005). In other words, regardless of the women’s current family structure, they attempted to be “all things to all people” – their children, spouse, parents, coworkers, and so on.

Even though the current family structures of the 14 female superintendent participants varied, all of the women discussed challenges for themselves and for women, in general, who attempt to balance the traditional gender-specific role expectations of wife and mother, while also engaging with the traditionally male-defined discourse of the superintendency. Feminist postructuralists emphasized, “When a discourse becomes “normal” and “natural,” it is difficult to think and act outside it” (Adams St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485). Essentially, the gendered expectations for women, as wives and mothers, shaped the female superintendents’ own perception of “normal” practices. This was evidenced in that most of the married female superintendents viewed the traditional role of wife or mother as one that no one else could effectively assume. Even though many of the women received extensive support at home (from either a spouse or parent), they still
perceived themselves as ultimately responsible for the housework, cooking, shopping, caring for the children, and general management of the household, an example of women operating within the traditional discourses associated with the superintendency and mother/wife. None of the women reported frustrations with their husbands for inadequately tending to the children’s needs or failure to provide enough support. Rather, they seemed to view these responsibilities, traditionally expected of women, as ones they should continue to handle, and if they failed to do so, they expressed frustration and disappointment with themselves. These beliefs further illustrated feminist poststructuralists’ assertions regarding women’s struggles in challenging or altering previously held beliefs associated with the discourses that became “normal” or “natural” (Adams St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485).

In addition, the women whose children still lived at home often expressed a sense of guilt for being absent from their own children’s events due to the significant demands of the superintendency. They repeatedly expressed appreciation to their husbands for taking on many of the responsibilities the women believed to be their own. Beth also shared conflicting internal struggles as she interacted with the superintendency within the traditionally male-dominated discourse versus the traditional gendered expectations of a wife and mother, reporting:

When I finish the day, I still have to go home, and I have to wash the clothes and clean the house. My husband is supportive, but I know my house is a reflection of me. I’m sometimes resentful to know that I still have to go home and be the wife and mommy.
In contrast, JoAnn denied encountering gender-related barriers as superintendent. JoAnn, whose father served as superintendent for 33 years, grew up working alongside him and understood the expectations associated with this job. She described the “give-and-take” relationship she and her husband shared from the beginning of their careers as educators. JoAnn stated:

I’m unique in that my husband and I were band directors together. We shared household jobs. [The children] were very involved in the schools, and their dad and I were both band directors…There were a lot of late nights with our children. [They] were very active in school activities…at night, my husband and I would take turns taking them to whatever they had, and weekends, if we weren’t at school events, we were at soccer…But I was very lucky in the support staff of family.

JoAnn, who repeatedly denied facing any gender-associated barriers relative to accessing the superintendency, perceived herself as “lucky” in that she received extensive support in caring for her children, both from her own parents and her husband. This support, as JoAnn indicated, essentially opened the door for her to advance in her own career. JoAnn’s explanation implied that without the significant, ongoing support of her spouse and parents, she might have been forced to choose between her own career advancement and the responsibilities associated with being a wife and mother. JoAnn’s own denial of having experienced gendered role expectations seemed contradictory as she implied that it was ultimately her own responsibility to serve in the role of wife and caretaker of the children, but the “help” and support of her parents and husband opened the door for her to overcome this potential barrier. Of the female superintendents who
were single with children still living at home, the women emphasized the crucial role
their parents played in providing ongoing support to enable the women to serve in dual
roles of superintendent and mother.

All of the female superintendents who moved into the superintendency after their
own children were no longer living at home also discussed the difficulties they predicted
they would have faced in effectively doing the job, as superintendent, when their own
children were younger. According to Nancy, who became superintendent after her
children were adults:

I think this job would be difficult if I still had all the activities that I had to go to
when my children were younger. It would’ve been very difficult, but my children
were married [when she became superintendent], and they have children of their
own. I spend less time with my grandchildren than I want, but I still make time for
them.

All of the married female superintendents in this study reported receiving
extensive help from their husbands. To enable the women to be successful as
superintendents, however, their spouses often shifted into a discourse typically associated
with females - buying groceries, packing lunches, carpooling children, and so on. Men
acting within this discourse represented a direct contrast to the traditional discourse for
men, as the “bread-winner” and financial provider for their families. Even as men
increased in proficiency in taking on more traditional standpoints or discourses
traditionally associated with wife and mother, the female superintendents often expressed
a sense of guilt and were unable to let go of traditional gendered role expectations
(Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Aston, et al., 2011; Barrett, 2005; Dressman, 2008, Foucault,
1983; Weedon, 1996). Previous studies also reported women’s ongoing struggles in balancing competing discourses associated with the superintendency (e.g. Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hall, 1996; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Norwood, 2005; Ostos, 2012; Rhode, 2014).

In addition to the female superintendents coexisting within multiple discourses, their spouses also floated between the traditional gendered stereotypes of husband, breadwinner, head of household with that of homemaker, child-care provider, and so on. According to feminist standpoint theory, women’s continual engagement from the nurturer, mother, and wife standpoints served as the foundation for their high degree of proficiency in these roles, and not simply because of their gender (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005; Wood, 2009). Therefore, men who shifted into some of the traditional female roles (nurturer, mother, homemaker) naturally became increasingly better equipped to take on more of the historically female gendered roles, primarily because of increasing opportunities for the men to act within these roles (standpoints). The spouses of the female superintendents who continually floated between the traditional role of husband, breadwinner and father, into nurturer or caretaker (roles or standpoints typically associated with women) improved their degree of proficiency in these roles, simply by shifting into standpoints typically associated with women (Hekman, 1997; Sprague, 2005; Wood, 2009).

In general, the female superintendents engaged in the typically male-dominated discourse associated with the superintendency but struggled to escape the traditional gendered role expectations of wife and mother, an illustration of an internal barrier the female superintendents imposed upon themselves. Essentially, these women coexisted
within more than one discourse, the traditional discourse of wife and mother, and the historically male discourse of the superintendency. The literature included multiple references to female superintendents, also wives and mothers, who experienced frustrations and feelings of inadequacy as they attempted to operate within the historically male discourse of the superintendency (e.g. Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hall, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Norwood, 2005; Ostos, 2012; Rhode, 2014). Gendered expectations related to women’s roles as wife and mother represented a significant barrier for the female superintendents. Women will likely continue to be underrepresented in the superintendency without a shift in the traditionally gendered discourse of the superintendency.

Another internal struggle faced by the female superintendents related to the very public nature of the superintendency. Both elected and appointed female superintendents emphasized the intense scrutiny they constantly encountered from the public. In addition to the pressure on the superintendent herself, the women’s families struggled when the community criticized or harassed the woman they knew as mother, wife, or daughter. Even though the politics of the superintendency typically originated from external sources, the female superintendents’ families struggled internally within their family structure, to accept and understand this construct as a natural component of any superintendent’s role. (As a result, this barrier was considered as an internal hindrance for the female superintendents.) Ann described the difficulties her family encountered during the initial stages of her superintendency, stating:
They were used to me working a lot and long hours. What they weren’t used to were people having conversations about the school and tying me to those conversations…They weren’t used to the community and parental and community piece that comes more with the superintendency.

Even though politics consistently undergirded much of their work, as superintendent, the women’s families found it difficult to accept public criticism of their wives, mothers, or daughters. The female superintendents described this as a significant barrier, especially in the initial stages of their superintendency. Several women reported their families had an extremely difficult time moving past this component of the superintendency. However, they also emphasized their own role in helping their families in accepting the public and political nature of the superintendency as critical in garnering continued support from their parents, children, and spouse. In doing so, these women applied subjectivity and agency toward traditional gender-bound discourses, demonstrating their own understanding of the discourse associated with the male superintendency, then guiding their own families into a deeper understanding of the very public nature of the superintendency, regardless of gender (Aston et al., 2011).

Society’s gendered expectations for women, as subordinates, and men as dominants, represented an external barrier for the female superintendents (Aston, et al., 2011; Barrett, 2005; Dressman, 2008; Flax, 1979, Focault, 1983; Lugg, 2003; Wahyumi, 2012; Weedon, 2005; Wood, 2009). In order for the female superintendents to overcome this external barrier, both women and men were forced to readjust their own historical gender-bound expectations. Traditionally, men served as the “bread-winner” of the family, working longer hours and providing more financial security for the family unit. In
this study, most of the participating female superintendents indicated their salaries were the primary source of money for the family unit, an example of women operating outside a discourse typically associated with women. Therefore, the married female superintendents who earned greater salaries than their husbands operated within a discourse historically associated with men. Likewise, the husbands of these women often shifted into a more subordinate role, usually associated with women, shifting both husband and wife to a standpoint generally associated with the opposing gender. Even though the married female superintendents in this study struggled with fully shifting gendered roles, they seemed to find a balance that worked within their own marriages.

The female superintendents who were divorced or widowed were accustomed to acting in both traditional male and female discourses - within their family units as they handled parenting and household responsibilities, along with the role of “head of the household.” Because of events in their own personal lives, these women were forced into the role of head of household, breadwinner, and so on. Barbara, a widow, described her experiences, as superintendent, in a district where she was hired following the death of her husband and after her own children were adults. She stated:

Living in a place that’s very different than where I raised my family, I think it’s a good thing, and it makes a difference with how I’m perceived and how I handle business…They don’t see me as mother and wife…They only know me as superintendent.

Barbara implied the community’s perception of her, as superintendent, was different than if they had known her in the role of a wife and mother. In her opinion, the public perceived her in the typically male-gendered role of superintendent, and she perceived
this as an advantage enabling her to avoid the gender-related perceptions associated with mother/wife.

In summary, the female superintendents shifted between traditional gendered expectations associated with mother, wife, and daughter, in order to be successful as superintendent, a position historically defined by expectations associated with masculinity. Also, the families or spouses of the female superintendents shifted discourses to facilitate the female superintendents’ success.

*Gendered expectations as female superintendents.* The superintendency, historically dominated by males, represents a patriarchal structure where men have continued to hold more power in the U.S. educational system than women (AASA, 2000, 2010, 2013; Flax, 1979), an example of an external barrier. For this study, the oppressive nature of the superintendency was reflected in (1) the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents, and (2) the expectations for the manner in which women interacted with the superintendency. The very core of feminist theory promotes the notion that men and women interact with the world differently (Flax, 1979). Therefore, female and male superintendents are naturally expected to exhibit different philosophies, possess unique strengths and weaknesses, and interact with the superintendency differently.

The female superintendents’ perceptions of gendered expectations within the superintendency varied. Some of the female superintendents suggested that society, in general, still perceived the superintendency, as a man’s job, doubting women’s ability to handle the responsibilities associated with the superintendency. Ann reported, “Men are perceived to have a no-nonsense type of mindset that people are going to accept his decisions and not challenge him as much as they are going to do us” [referring to female
superintendents]. Some of the female superintendents reported they were expected to interact with the superintendency in the same manner as men, including expectations for female superintendents’ leadership styles, personalities, and behaviors. In other words, female superintendents were expected to operate within the traditional discourse of the male superintendent. Yet, the women who exhibited “take charge,” aggressive leadership styles (typically associated with men) were perceived as “cold and distant.” In addition, the women reported that male superintendents often seemed uncomfortable in knowing how to interact with female superintendents, both individually and collectively. In one case, Hannah stated that a male superintendent directed her to the other side of the room where the “ladies” were supposed to sit. Sarah, Morgan, and Beth reported resistance from male colleagues when they attempted to ask questions, offer feedback, and provide input into decisions related to issues typically associated with men’s expertise (such as sports, transportation, or maintenance).

Of the female superintendents reporting challenges related to gendered expectations, the challenges were consistently associated with women attempting to interact within the traditional male-dominated discourse of the superintendency. In other words, as long as the female superintendents interacted with the superintendency within a discourse traditionally associated with women, they experienced fewer barriers. In contrast, the women who attempted to interact with the superintendency within the traditional discourse associated with male superintendents experienced challenges, often impossible to overcome. The research supported the continuing existence of society’s gendered expectations for the superintendency, stating, “Today’s public schools still expect a high degree of gender conformity” (Lugg, 2003, p. 10). In this study, most of the
female superintendents described their own experiences, as superintendents, and those generally aligned with the superintendency within the parameters of the traditional female discourse. In other words, these women remained inside the gendered boundaries imposed by traditional societal expectations as they served as leaders within their school districts.

Of the 14 female superintendents participating in the study, four stepped outside the boundaries of the traditional stereotype associated with a female discourse. These female superintendents were unapologetically bold, unafraid to speak out, willing to take risks, and challenged male colleagues. Most importantly, they were not the least bit intimidated by the fact that male superintendents significantly outnumbered them. In each of these cases, the women reported significantly greater barriers than the female superintendents who interacted with the superintendency within a traditional female gendered discourse.

Several of the female superintendents who remained within the traditional female discourse were openly critical of other female superintendents (who were also participants in the study) who stepped out of the “expected” gendered leadership behaviors. For example, when discussing the political aspect of the superintendency, Lynn shared her frustrations related to one of the female superintendents, stating:

She misrepresents things…She tells them in a way that was not the intent of the way it was spoken, whether it’s something that comes from MDE [Mississippi Department of Education] or something that comes from MASS [Mississippi Association of School Superintendents], I don’t wanta’ say misrepresented the
truth, but she twisted what was said to make it fit some other agenda that I don’t subscribe to, and so maybe that’s why I’m not getting it.

Lynn continued naming and describing the female superintendents throughout the state with whom she consistently communicated. All three of the women she named were also participants in this study. Each of these women, along with Lynn, shared experiences during their own interviews describing their own interaction with the superintendency within the traditional female gendered discourse. Lynn’s comments affirmed the overall generalization associated with feminist theory – that is, both male and female colleagues perceive female superintendents who interact with the superintendency in a manner atypical of societal gender role stereotypes negatively. In addition, the female superintendents who crossed the gendered expectations for the superintendency encountered significantly greater barriers. A number of researchers emphasized the degree to which society impacts gender role expectations, including those related to accepted behaviors, traits, leadership practices, and attitudes (e.g. Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012; Young, 2005). In addition, women who served in leadership roles, such as the superintendency, were more successful when they did not attempt to emulate a “gender-neutral” leadership style (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011, p. 113). The literature aligned with the results of the current study in that the female superintendents who interacted with their role, as superintendents, exhibiting behaviors, actions, or attitudes typically associated with men, were criticized by both male and female superintendents (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003; McGrath, 1992; Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012; Young, 2005).
In addition to criticism, these women encountered barriers impacting their success as superintendents. According to Gammill and Vaughn (2011), when in positions of leadership, women who attempted to lead in the same manner as men were generally unsuccessful. The key word here is “unsuccessful.” The female superintendents within this research study, who demonstrated behaviors, considered “inappropriate” by some of their female colleagues, were, in fact, leaders of the highest academic achieving school districts throughout the state. However, overall, the female superintendents who demonstrated leadership practices aligned to traditional female-gendered expectations experienced fewer barriers than the women who interacted with the superintendency in a manner aligned to society’s expectation for the traditional male discourse of the superintendency. Viewing through the lens of feminist theory, the association with female-gendered leadership practices for women, as appropriate or inappropriate, represents the continuing presence of oppressive structures negatively impacting women’s access to leadership opportunities, including the superintendency (Flax, 1979; McCabe, 2001).

According to Flax (1979), the underlying purpose of feminist theory is to illuminate these types of structures in order to help women overcome oppression. In order for more women to gain access to top leadership roles, such as the superintendency, both female and male leaders must seek a deeper understanding of society’s traditional gendered expectations. While this study did not offer male superintendents an opportunity to share their perceptions related to barriers for female superintendents in Mississippi, it revealed the women’s varying perceptions related to the appropriateness of various gendered leadership behaviors. In doing so, it also illuminated the need for
Mississippi’s female superintendents to celebrate their own differences, learn from each others’ mistakes, and join together as a united, diverse group of educators, with the goal of redefining the traditional discourse of the superintendency.

*The Good Ole Boys’ Club*

The female superintendents, with the exception of JoAnn, agreed that the Good Ole Boys’ Club remained an ever-present external barrier for women’s ascent to the superintendency and to their overall success. The women reported The Good Ole Boys continued to operate within the discourse of traditional male expectations and presented numerous problems for most of the female superintendents, with the primary purpose of preventing women from moving upward into leadership roles such as the superintendency (Ryan, 2012; Shakeshaft, 1999). According to poststructuralists, the continuing existence of the Good Ole Boys’ Club facilitates the preservation of a patriarchal structure historically present within the U.S. public educational system, the superintendency, guaranteeing that men will continue to have “more power than women, and more access whatever society esteems” (Flax, 1979, p. 82). The female superintendents reported experiencing overt incidences with the Good Ole Boys, and at other times, incidences occurred in a discrete, less obvious manner. The women also stated that men often gained access to superintendents’ positions, simply because of their connection to the Good Ole Boys’ network. In addition, the female superintendents emphasized that leadership opportunities within the state superintendents’ organizations remain largely dominated by the Good Ole Boys. The women expressed their desire for the long-standing presence of the Good Ole Boys’ Club to dissolve. Renee predicted the demise of the Good Ole Boys’ Club may be on the horizon, stating:
The Good Ole Boys look out for each other. They only want the Good Ole Boys. They think only the Good Ole Boys can get anything done. I have been in meetings, and I think they are on their way out. I think these days, people are just not willing to put up with the Good Ole Boys as much as they used to run and control everything. There are too many things that are in place that if the Good Ole Boys aren’t careful, they will have a lawsuit against them.

According to Gupton and Slick (1996), The Good Ole Boys’ Club was identified as the predominant barrier for women attempting to access the superintendency. In contrast to Renee’s assessment of the potential demise of the Good Ole Boys, Morrison (2012) reported identical results when she replicated Gupton and Slick’s (1996) study. In other words, at the time of this study, the Good Ole Boys’ Club remained alive and well in Mississippi, representing an oppressive structure preventing women’s advancement into the superintendency. In addition, the continued presence of this historical barrier perpetuated the patriarchal nature of the top leadership role in education, the superintendency.

*The Glass Ceiling*

In addition to the historical external barrier of the Good Ole Boys’ Club, the existence of a “glass ceiling,” was reported repeatedly in the literature and referred to as an invisible barrier preventing women from moving into top leadership positions, such as the superintendency (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; Northouse, 2007; Ryan, 2012; Wynn, 2014). In almost every interview, the female superintendents were unfamiliar with the term “glass ceiling” and asked me to explain its meaning. After doing so, there were a variety of responses from the 14 female
superintendents. Some women questioned whether females were even taking risks to secure higher advancement opportunities such as the superintendency. Others emphasized the role of determination and hard work in attaining a leadership role such as the superintendency. Renee blamed the Good Ole Boys and cited the importance of women taking risks and stepping out of their comfort zone:

The glass ceiling is there because there are Good Ole Boys who wanta’ keep us from those positions. It is there, but because women think about it, many don’t even try. My take on this is you have to pursue what you want, and if it’s for you, you’re gonna’ get it. Nothing in the world is going to be able to keep women from going as high as they can go, but they’re never going to get it if they don’t pursue it. So, women can’t hold themselves back even though it does exist, it will never be broken unless we break it. The more women who seek the superintendency, the more people will see that women are just as capable, just as intelligent, and can get the job done. We just have to keep chipping away at the glass ceiling until it’s gone.

Several of the women reported incidences when they were chided for even striving to access the superintendency. Beth shared an experience where she was encouraged to be satisfied as assistant superintendent. In addition, some women shared their stories related to the perception of being over qualified for the job. Women’s only hope, according to the majority of the participants, is to be significantly more qualified than the male applicants. Ann concluded, “All things being equal, the male would have the advantage.”
Essentially, the glass ceiling represents another external structure described by feminist theorists as perpetuating the continuing presence of structures ensuring men’s power over women and denying equal access to top leadership positions, such as the superintendency, to women (Flax, 1979). The female superintendents expressed varying views related to the existence of the glass ceiling. As Wynn (2014) discovered in a recent study, women who successfully attained top leadership roles were less likely to acknowledge the existence of the glass ceiling. Perhaps the female superintendents who denied the existence of a glass ceiling may have responded differently had they been unsuccessful in attaining the top leadership position in Mississippi public schools.

Discussion Related to Research Question Two

The following section provides an overview of the discussion related to research question, which asked, “What were perceived common traits, dispositions, and practices of women currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting within the state of Mississippi?”

The analysis of data related to research question one provided an overview of the female superintendents’ perceptions of the barriers they encountered as superintendents in Mississippi. As the women shared their stories, these barriers not only characterized obstacles for the current female superintendents, but they also represented potential challenges that may perpetuate the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi public schools. It is critical to understand the recursive relationship between the two research questions. In contrast to the first research question where barriers were discussed, the female superintendents’ responses to the second research question provided information related to the manner in which these women
interacted with the superintendency. Thus, responses to the first research question
provided an overview of the obstacles, and responses to the second research question
described perceptions of the female superintendents’ dispositions, attitudes, and practices.
During the data analysis process, common, recurring themes emerged relative to the
perceived traits, dispositions, and practices of these women. These included the women’s
belief systems, leadership practices, and mentor relationships.

Belief Systems

Analysis of the data, through the lens of a feminist standpoint theoretical
framework, provided an understanding of the impact the women’s experiences influenced
the development of their own belief systems (Hekman, 1997; Wahyuni, 2012; Wood,
2009). This belief system developed out of the women’s experiences, beginning as young
girls, where they were taught and expected to demonstrate nurturing behaviors. In some
cases, the women reported caring for younger siblings, often taking on responsibilities for
their mothers. Their own mothers, grandmothers, and other female figures within their
families modeled these behaviors and expectations. As a result, the female
superintendents developed a level of expertise in performing these duties and eventually
assumed the behaviors as a part of their own identity or discourse. These findings aligned
with the literature, which reported female superintendents possessed beliefs and values
that ultimately defined their leadership experiences (Beard, 2012; Coleman, 2000; Lane-
Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Ostos, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Palladino et al., 2007;
Wynn, 2014).

Feminist poststructuralists emphasized that women acting within the traditional
female discourse perceived their role, as nurturers, caretakers, and wives (Aston et al.,
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In addition to serving as nurturers, the female superintendents learned the value of hard work early in their childhood. In most instances, they attributed the development of a strong work ethic to their mothers or grandmothers. However, JoAnn credited the influence of her father, who served as superintendent for over 30 years in the same district where she served at the time of the study, as the primary source of inspiration in the emergence of her own work ethic.

As superintendents, the women were accustomed to working significantly long hours, reporting this practice as something they did even before they moved into the superintendency. As superintendents, they generally attended multiple evening events, some of which were associated with the school district and others as community events. In addition, the women’s professional experiences, prior to the superintendency, were typically multi-dimensional, where they often wore numerous hats and took on many varying responsibilities. Yet, they remained steadfast in the importance of their role at home as well. Even with significant support for their responsibilities at home, the female superintendents generally perceived (and attempted) to “do it all.” The women’s belief systems instilled within them from an early age, along with their dogged persistence and work ethic, and experiences enacting multiple standpoints and within dual discourses emerged as significant factors positively impacting their work as superintendents and facilitating their success (Aston et al., 2011; Barrett, 2005; Dressman, 2008; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Focault, 1983; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003; Morrison, 2012; Rhode, 2014; Sandburg, 2013; Weedon, 1996).
Leadership Practices

In addition to the female superintendents’ exhibiting common belief systems, they also demonstrated leadership practices that facilitated their success. Overall, the women practiced a shared leadership philosophy where they consistently sought buy-in from all stakeholders. They considered communication and relationship building as the primary tools that determined the degree to which they were successful. According to the literature, women generally lead by enacting a collaborative approach, often resulting in a more inclusive culture (Helgeson, 1990; Hoyt, 2007). Multiple researchers also reported female leaders typically prefer to lead from within the organization and focus on developing relationships (e.g. Gilligan, 1993; Grogan, 2008; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hoyt, 2007; McGrath, 1992; Noddings, 1984; Ostos, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Palladino et al., 2007; Wheatley, 1992). Because most of the women in this study served in a teaching capacity for a number of years prior to the superintendency, they placed significant focus on curriculum and instruction and student achievement. Other researchers also reported instructional leadership as an area of expertise for female superintendents (e.g. Grogan, 2005; McGrath, 1992; Page-Hite, 2004).

Viewing through a feminist poststructuralist lens, the female superintendents enacted their own leadership practices directly aligned to their own gendered experiences (Aston et al., 2011; Barrett, 2005; Dressman, 2008; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Focault, 1983; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hoyt, 2007; Lugg, 2003; Morrison, 2012, Weedon, 1996). Accustomed to the discourse associated with caretaker and nurturer, the female superintendents demonstrated a natural propensity to care for their families. These same practices naturally prepared women to demonstrate a shared, collaborative, servant type
of leadership as superintendents. In addition, most of the female superintendents served as classroom teachers for a number of years. As a result, they became experts in this area, operating within the standpoint of a teacher, and naturally transferred their acquired expertise related to curriculum and instruction to their role as superintendents. Overall, the women perceived themselves as servants to the students, teachers, administrators, community, school board, and so on. These common leadership practices demonstrated by the female superintendents in this study represented facilitators toward the women’s success.

Mentors

The lack of access to mentors for female superintendents was originally reported as a barrier in the literature review in Chapter II (Grogan, 2005; Gupton & Slick 1996; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2010; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Morrison, 2012; Ryan 2012). As the female superintendents shared their own stories related to mentoring experiences, I recognized the significant role the mentors played in each of the women’s success. I made the decision to classify mentors as facilitators for the women’s success because (1) only two of the female superintendents participating in this study reported not having a mentor. This finding was in stark contrast to the literature, which reported female superintendents having little access to quality mentors or mentoring experiences (Grogan, 2005; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2010; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Lemasters & Roach; Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012), and (2) the female superintendents shared the many benefits of having a mentor, leading me to classify mentors as a facilitator for the women’s success.
Overall, twelve of the female superintendents reported having a mentor, and all emphasized the positive impact their mentors had on their professional growth and access to greater opportunities. The 12 mentors were equally split, in terms of gender. In general, the male and female mentors performed their mentoring duties similarly aligned with the traditional gendered discourse associated with the superintendency (Morrison, 2012; Ryan, 2012). For example, male mentors served as connectors or links for the female mentees but did not necessarily become an integral component of the female mentees’ day-to-day work experiences. Essentially, these men used their own connections to facilitate the progress of the female mentee, by giving the women opportunities for advancement, introducing them to key people who had potential to provide some sort of needed support, and so on. In contrast, the female mentors enacted their mentoring role as if they were a teacher, constantly guiding, communicating, and building a relationship with the mentee. The male mentors seemed to open doors for their mentees (Perkins, 2014; Ryan, 2012). The female mentors, however, provided a deeper, more integrated approach in their service as mentors, continuing to collaborate, counsel, and encourage their female mentee (Perkins, 2014). Regardless of the mentor’s gender, the female superintendents indicated their presence positively facilitated their own success as superintendents.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The following section provides a discussion of the conclusions of the study, implications of the study, and recommendations for practice, policy, and further research.
Conclusions

*Gender revealed.* Many of the findings of this study were similar to previous studies investigating the continuing underrepresentation of women in the superintendency, both within Mississippi and throughout the U.S. (e.g. Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Coleman, 2012; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan, 1996, 2003, 2008; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; McGrath, 1992; Mendez-Morse, 1998, 2004; Morrison, 2012; Norwood, 2005; Ostos, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Ryan, 2012). For example, earlier studies reported similar barriers facing female superintendents as were shared by the participants in this study. In addition, the women’s dispositions, attitudes, and practices paralleled those of other female superintendents reported in the literature (e.g. Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Coleman, 2012; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan, 1996, 2003, 2008; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; McGrath, 1992; Mendez-Morse, 1998, 2004; Morrison, 2012; Ostos, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Norwood, 2005; Ryan, 2012). Throughout the data analysis process, themes emerged that were aligned to each of the research questions. For example, in response to research question one, gendered expectations for women, the Good Ole Boys’ Club, and the glass ceiling were identified as primary barriers. In addition, in response to research question two, the perceived traits, dispositions, and practices of the female superintendents related to the women’s belief systems, leadership practices, and the positive impact of engaging with mentors.
As I considered these findings, I became frustrated that I had done all of this work; yet, it seemed my own findings mirrored most of the previously conducted studies (e.g. Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Coleman, 2012; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan, 1996, 2003, 2008; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; McCabe, 2001; McGrath, 1992; Mendez-Morse, 1998, 2004; Morrison, 2012; Ostos, 2012; Page-Hite, 2004; Norwood, 2005; Ryan, 2012). At this point, I reviewed each of the transcripts from the interviews with all 14 female superintendents, along with my original coding of the interview data. Since the study itself was grounded in feminist theory, I expected women’s and men’s experiences, even as superintendents, to differ (Flax, 1979). However, one of the primary goals of feminist theory is to understand existing patriarchal structures (such as the superintendency) which continue to exclude or oppress women’s opportunities for equal access (Flax, 1979). Even though I had identified specific barriers, I truly felt there was a deeper explanation for the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents than the same barriers historically reported.

As I reflected, I gradually realized the original analysis and reporting of common themes within the data was focused primarily upon responding to the research questions. In doing so, I failed to focus upon the purpose of the study, understanding the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of females as superintendents in Mississippi. At this point, I revisited the data and focused on identifying an over-arching theme(s) that would offer an explanation for why women remain significantly underrepresented within the superintendency in Mississippi. As a result, gender
discrimination emerged as the ever-present, overarching theme. Throughout this phase of data analysis, I realized the barriers from the female superintendents’ interviews I previously reported were essentially a manifestation of gender discrimination. In addition, even though the female superintendents in this study were successful in accessing the superintendency, the perceived traits, dispositions, and practices also reflected gendered expectations. As a result, I concluded that gender significantly impacted both women and men, relative to the superintendency, and also within a broader context. Further, traditional gendered expectations must be acknowledged, in order to truly enact authentic change. Even though I spent the past 18 months researching and studying the underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi, my initial analysis failed to recognize gender discrimination as the prevailing factor impacting women’s opportunities to higher leadership opportunities such as the superintendency. Thus, even my own gendered perceptions impacted the analysis and interpretation of the data. My perceptions represented one of the primary tenets of feminist theory which emphasizes women’s general acceptance of the world as it is structured, often failing (avoiding) to recognize gender as a significant barrier (Flax, 1979; Frye, 1990; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009).

Apathy. In addition to women simply accepting the world as it is structured (Flax, 1979; Frye, 1990; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009), apathy, a type of avoidance behavior, was a prevailing theme that permeated throughout every phase of this research study, starting with the number of women who declined to participate in this study. Of 34 women serving as superintendents in Mississippi during the 2014-2015 school year, less than half
were willing to participate. Even though I knew many of these women on a professional level, the majority of them chose not to participate.

Of the female superintendent participants, most contradicted themselves as they discussed the existence of gender-related barriers and stereotypes relative to the superintendency. For example, Rose reported, “I can’t tell you that my being a woman, that I would’ve been treated any differently, assuming I did the same work [as a male superintendent may have].” Yet, she later described specific challenges she encountered related to the Good Ole Boys’ Club. In addition, Rose stated women typically use gender as an excuse when unsuccessful in accessing higher positions. This practice, she explained, is part of the reason women gain fewer top leadership positions. In general, Rose blamed women for using gender as an excuse for failing to gain access to higher positions and denied the existence of gender-related barriers, even though she shared her own personal struggles with the Good Ole Boys’ Club. Many of the other women’s responses mirrored Rose’s inconsistent attitude in connecting gender with their struggles as female superintendents.

When the female superintendents expressed views indicating gendered issues as nonexistent relative to the superintendency in Mississippi, they were then asked to explain their own ideas related to why women, then, remain significantly underrepresented in the superintendency. In other words, if gender was not the issue, why, then, had so few women gained access to the superintendency in Mississippi? Like Rose, several of the female participants blamed women themselves for self-imposing barriers upon themselves and questioned whether females were even attempting to secure a superintendent’s position.
For example, Morgan asked:

Are women applying for [these] positions, or do they think, no, that position I can’t do because I have family or…are women even seeing themselves in these positions? How many women applied? How many men applied? I don’t know the answer. I do know there are quite a few fewer [female superintendents] because I’m at the meetings, and I can tell that I’m a minority.

Other female superintendents acknowledged their own success in ascending to the superintendency but also blamed female colleagues’ apathy, unwillingness to take risks, and failure to apply for top leadership positions, as the real problem. Only one of the women explicitly reported gender as a significant contributing factor to the underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi. Overall, the women contradicted themselves as to whether the continuing low representation of females as superintendents actually represented a problem.

According to Rhode (2014), “A central problem for women is the lack of consensus that there still is a serious problem, or one that they have any capacity or responsibility to address” (p. 6). Rhode labeled this phenomenon as “the no problem problem” (p. 6) and emphasized the continuing existence of issues related to gender inequality and women’s advancement opportunities to top leadership positions. In general, the female superintendents exhibited the same “no problem problem” attitude as described by Rhode when they denied or downplayed the existence of gender-related barriers with regard to the superintendency in Mississippi, and whether this, in fact, represented a problem. Yet, the numbers indicated the existence of a problem in that
females represented only 23 percent of Mississippi’s overall superintendent population for the 2014-2015 academic school year.

In contrast to the majority of the participants, four of the women openly acknowledged the continuing existence of barriers for female superintendents in Mississippi. Hannah described the visual impact of male and female superintendents sitting on separate sides of the room when attending her first superintendents’ meeting. Acknowledging that women had made some progress, Hannah further emphasized, “When you talk about educational leadership, the female voice has a long way to go.” In closing my interview with Ann, another of the female superintendents, she discussed society’s beliefs that men are better equipped to serve in strong leadership roles, such as the superintendency. Ann shared her own experiences in applying for the superintendancy:

I wouldn’t doubt for a minute, if there had been some strong males in the pool [of applicants], and they [the school board] had had some other options, I probably wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you right now.

Ann and I also discussed the conflicting views of women, in terms of whether gendered expectations continue to exist relative to Mississippi’s superintendency. Ann closed our interview by stating, “Yeah, it’s a problem. It is; it is indeed a problem.”

In conclusion, two primary themes emerged as a result of this research study. First, gender discrimination represented the primary factor impacting every area of the female superintendents’ lives – both professionally and personally; and second, the women often denied the existence of or failed to recognize any existence of challenges associated with gender.
Implications

Based on the findings and conclusions of the research study, specific implications were constructed, with the goal of addressing the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi K-12 public schools. These implications included the following: (1) gendered stereotypes for female and male superintendents, (2) the no problem problem, and (3) no man’s land.

Gendered stereotypes for male and female superintendents. Looking beyond the immediate answers to each of the research questions, gender discrimination emerged as the prevailing factor impacting every facet of these women’s lives. In fact, gender essentially defined the women’s own personhood, including the manner in which they interacted with the superintendency. Feminist theory was used as a lens for analyzing and discussing gendered stereotypes because it assumes women and men experience the superintendency differently (Flax, 1979). Ann compared society’s differing perceptions and expectations for female and male superintendents:

Men can make certain decisions, and they are accepted by the stakeholders.

Women are expected to demonstrate more empathy. Males are cut and dry…like they don’t really have to justify a firing; whereas women are expected to work with them more, and so on. You have to have your ducks all in a row when you terminate someone because it is an expectation that women are more understanding. Women are often challenged more when they make a difficult decision. The day-to-day things that occur and decisions that have to be made are just viewed through different lenses.
While this study did not involve male superintendents as participants, one implication of the study is the potential need to consider the degree to which gendered stereotypes impact men, as well as for women. Sarah shared one specific stereotype associated with men and stated:

Our society has made it so that men have always been the breadwinners, so that’s their role. They just get up, go to work, and do their job. They don’t think about those other things; whereas women have those touchy feely kind of personalities. In addition, Sarah emphasized societal perceptions regarding qualifications for the superintendency. She stated, “The superintendency is still perceived as a male’s job. Males are perceived as more knowledgeable. Perception is our greatest barrier, but perception is reality.” Renee echoed Sarah’s comments, “The perception is that women are not smart enough to be in those [superintendent’s] positions.” In general, the women shared their perceptions of male and female gendered expectations for men and women, indicating the significant impact of gender.

The no problem problem. A second implication of this study related to the degree to which both men and women acknowledged the gender disparity in Mississippi’s superintendency as a problem. As the researcher, my own initial failure to recognize gender discrimination as the female superintendents’ primary barrier illustrated the same attitudes demonstrated by most of the women. Instead of identifying gender discrimination as the main factor (cause) impacting the women, I perceived the manifestations that occurred as a result of the women’s gender as the primary barrier. While I acknowledged the existence of a problem, I overlooked gender discrimination as the real issue. Similarly, most of the female participants denied the existence of gender-
related barriers, in spite of the fact that women continued to be significantly underrepresented in Mississippi’s superintendency.

Some of the female superintendents questioned whether women were even attempting to access top leadership jobs such as the superintendency. Clearly, female teachers in Mississippi significantly outnumbered women in educational leadership positions. Women represented roughly 84% of the classroom teachers in Mississippi (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012), while only 50% of the schools throughout the state were led by female principals (MDE, 2014b) and 23% of Mississippi districts were led by female superintendents. Perhaps women in Mississippi were satisfied with their current roles, primarily as classroom teachers, and lacked aspirations to move upward into educational leadership. In addition, perhaps some women were intimidated by the possibility of rejection if they attempted to move beyond the classroom into leadership positions.

In addition, some of the female superintendents failed to perceive the underrepresentation of women in Mississippi’s superintendency as a problem. Even when I reminded the women of the statistics related to the large representation of females as teachers in Mississippi, compared to female principals and superintendents, the women typically blamed other women or failed to perceive the disparity as a problem. The attitudes of the female superintendents reflected the “no problem problem” perception as described by Rhode (2014, p. 6). Freire (1970) provided an explanation for the women’s failure to recognize the underrepresentation of women as superintendents as a problem. According to Freire (1970), individuals accustomed to oppression naturally assume the conditions to which they are familiar as natural and demonstrate little desire to incite changes. Perhaps the women, accustomed to oppression, accepted the
underrepresentation of female superintendents in Mississippi’s superintendency as
comfortable and familiar and lacked desire to spur any time of increased awareness or
changes.

In addition, perhaps this type of acceptance of the situation extended to the male
superintendents. Even though this study did not include opportunities for male
superintendents to discuss their own awareness of gendered perceptions associated with
women attempting to access leadership opportunities such as the superintendency,
another implication of the study related to the degree to which men recognized the
significant gender inequity associated with the superintendency in Mississippi, and their
willingness to acknowledge this phenomenon as problematic.

No man’s land. The female superintendents often found themselves in a type of
No Man’s Land, a term typically associated with an unoccupied place (or land) where
uncertainty abounds, a place where expectations are unclear for everyone (“No Man’s
Land,” 2015). Most of the female superintendents shared experiences related to isolation,
working independently, and lacking support from colleagues. The women implied they
no longer “fit in” with female principals; yet, they were also rarely included in
discussions and networking opportunities with their male superintendent colleagues.
Even though the majority of the female superintendents reported receiving the support of
a mentor, they also shared multiple incidences of isolation or attending events where they
were significantly outnumbered by male superintendents. With the small numbers of
female superintendents in Mississippi, women reported having little access to other
female superintendents, often a result of the distance between school districts. In general,
another source of uncertainty in No Man’s Land for female superintendents related to
gendered expectations associated with perceptions of appropriate leadership practices. As a result, female superintendents often struggled to “fit in” with both male and female colleagues. The results of this study suggest a need for further support in assisting female superintendents navigate through No Man’s Land.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings and conclusions of the research study, specific recommendations for practice were identified, with the goal of addressing the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi K-12 public schools. Recommendations for practice included the following: (1) Women must lead the movement; and (2) Men must engage in the movement.

Women must lead the movement. According to Freire (1970), “Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (p. 26). Freire indicated that emancipation from oppression requires the deliberate, active engagement of both the oppressed and the oppressors, starting with acknowledging the existence of the problem. However, women, as those who were traditionally oppressed, must take initiative and lead the movement. In other words, moving beyond the traditional stereotypical discourses of both male and female superintendents will require female superintendents to identify strategies and lead conversations related to gendered perception and barriers.

According to Freire (1970):

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more
fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation. Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality, affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle. (p. 29)

Therefore, female superintendents must initiate the conversations related to the continuing underrepresentation of women in the superintendency in Mississippi. In doing so, women will, at the very least, open the lines of communication, no longer denying the existence of a problem.

*Men must also engage.* British actress and Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Women, Emma Watson, recently introduced her own initiative, known as *HeForShe*, in attempting to garner the support of men in addressing gender inequality and gendered expectations (Watson, 2014). Watson described the *HeForShe* movement as an effort to engage men in advocating for gender equity and emphasized the importance of men’s involvement, equal to that of women’s (Watson, 2014). Watson issued a challenge to all men, stating:

Gender equality is your issue too. Because to date, I’ve seen my father’s role as a parent being valued less by society, despite my need of his presence, as a child, as much as my mother’s. I’ve seen young men suffering from mental illness, unable to ask for help for fear it would make them less of a man…I’ve seen men made fragile and insecure by a distorted sense of what constitutes male success. Men don’t have the benefits of equality, either. We don’t often talk about men being
imprisoned by gender stereotypes, but I can see that they are, and that when they
are free, things will change for women as a natural consequence. If men don’t
have to be aggressive in order to be accepted, women won’t feel compelled to be
submissive. If men don’t have to control, women won’t have to be controlled.
Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive…and strong. It is time that
we all perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals. If we
stop defining each other by what we are not, and start defining ourselves by who
we are, we can be freer…I want men to take up this mantle so that their daughters,
sisters, and mothers can be free from prejudice, but also so that their sons have
permission to be vulnerable and human too, reclaim those parts of themselves
they abandoned, and in doing so, be a more true and complete version of
themselves. (Watson, 2014)

The results of this study revealed the continuing negative impact associated with
gendered expectations and gendered stereotypes for female superintendents. Reframing
the discourse of the superintendency, with the intent of understanding and fully
embracing the unique qualities of both male and female leaders, must become a priority
for public education. As Watson emphasized, the traditional gendered expectations for
men and women impede the progress of all individuals. Using a feminist postructural lens
supports the practice of men and women challenging their own traditional discourses
Aston et al. (2000), “Exploring and questioning how power relations are used within and
between discourses is a form of deconstruction that may get to the heart of how certain
knowledge, beliefs, and practices become entrenched and hegemonic in society” (p.
1191), emphasizing the critical need for open, reflective dialogue between men and women. In addition, men’s application of subjectivity toward women’s traditional discourse (and vice versa), and attention to the language used, could further illuminate entrenched hegemonic practices and assist women in successfully navigating through No Man’s Land. Common practice, then, must bring all superintendents to the table for discussions, regardless of gender. Otherwise, gendered expectations and barriers will remain a fixture within the U.S. educational system.

Recommendations for Policy

Based on the findings and conclusions of the research study, one significant specific recommendation for policy was identified, with the goal of addressing the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi K-12 public schools. Of all the recommendations, it was my belief that this recommendation for policy offered the most potential for positively impacting both male and female teachers and leaders. Therefore, it was recommended that topics and courses associated with gender consciousness become a required component of all undergraduate and graduate coursework, especially within departments of education and educational leadership.

In addition to engaging both male and female leaders in understanding and changing traditional gendered stereotypes, opportunities for engaging in reflective dialogue were recommended as integral components of educational leadership programs (Nelli, 2014; Perkins, 2014). According to Nelli (2014), topics associated with gender consciousness were typically excluded from doctoral programs, even though graduate students often solidify their own values during this phase of their educational careers. In
addition, avoiding these topics sends a message to future educational leaders that conversations associated with gender equity were not necessarily important to their future leadership role within the public school setting. Several researchers reported the topic of gender equity as almost nonexistent within their graduate school programs (Golde & Dore, 2004; Iselt, Brown, & Irby, 2001; Nelli, 2014), likely resulting in “low group cultural consciousness and commitment to gender issues” (Nelli, 2014, p. 96). The topic of gender inequity was typically included in a “broad social justice umbrella” (Nelli, 2014, p. 15) in some undergraduate and graduate studies. Feminist poststructuralists emphasized the importance of the inclusion of these conversations in order to enact needed changes (Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Aston et al., 2011; Barrett, 2005; Gough, 1991; Weedon, 1987).

In my own educational leadership graduate school program, there was no emphasis placed on gender-related issues throughout all three of the degree programs – master’s, specialist’s, and doctoral. My own personal awareness resulted when I observed and encountered incidences related to gender inequity after advancing into a higher leadership role within the public school setting. In identifying gender discrimination as the prevailing factor negatively impacting women’s (1) attempts in accessing the superintendency, and (2) successful tenure as superintendent, this study also revealed the urgency for universities to infuse gender consciousness into undergraduate programs and further integrate gender consciousness as a cornerstone of their graduate school programs. As institutions responsible for preparing future teachers and educational leaders, the need for gender consciousness as an integral component of the educational programs can no longer be ignored. Thus, university educational leadership programs
should implement new policies requiring educators, both undergraduate and graduate, to complete a minimum number of courses related to equity within the public education setting (gender, racial, economic, and so on). In essence, failure to acknowledge that gender consciousness is critical within the field of education further delays awareness and understanding for both male and female educators, including those who are superintendents. Avoidance of this topic and “not providing opportunities for future educational leaders to dialogue, study, and debate issues related to gender equity sends a message that there is no problem” (Nelli, 2014, p. 19). This silence, within our colleges of education, exacerbates the continuing presence of gendered stereotypes (Nelli, 2014). Therefore, it was recommended that The University of Southern Mississippi and other educational institutions responsible for training future educators, both within and beyond the state of Mississippi, evaluate course requirements in masters’, specialists’, and doctoral programs of study, especially in educational leadership programs, to ensure the inclusion of gender equity and gender consciousness.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and conclusions of the research study, specific recommendations for future research were identified, with the goal of addressing the phenomenon of the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi K-12 public schools. Recommendations for future research included the following: (1) expand the current study by using a case study methodology and prolonged engagement; (2) utilize quantitative methodology to analyze equity in Mississippi’s female and male superintendents’ salaries; (3) explore the intersection of gender and race relative to the superintendency, and (4) analyze current graduate and undergraduate
education and educational leadership degree programs of study in colleges throughout
Mississippi for inclusion (or exclusion) of gender consciousness; and (5) analyze
perceptions of college students in education and educational leadership programs related
to gender consciousness before and after receiving professional development related to
gendered expectations and inequity.

Utilize case study methodology to replicate this study. This qualitative study was
designed to include a single interview with each of the female superintendents. For future
research, it was recommended that the study include more than one interview with the
female superintendents in Mississippi and employ a case study methodology, including
prolonged engagement with particular participants in order to gain deeper insight into the
women’s daily practices, challenges, and successes.

Utilize quantitative methodology to analyze equity in female and male
superintendents. This study used qualitative methodology, primarily to provide the
female superintendents opportunities to share their stories. While this methodology was
effective in doing so, an examination of the equity of female and male superintendents’
salaries was impossible due to multiple variables. Therefore, I recommend further study
utilizing quantitative methods to investigate the equity of Mississippi’s female
superintendents’ salaries compared to male colleagues, and considering other variables
(such as district size, location, years of experience, and so on). Even though equity in
salary was not a focus for this study, comparing salary by superintendents’ gender
provides another means of ensuring fair, equitable practices for all superintendents.

Explore the intersection of gender and race relative to the superintendency. The
current study focused upon gender and the superintendency in Mississippi. For future
study, I recommend expanding the current study to consider the intersectionality of gender and race relative to the superintendency in Mississippi.

*Analyse current graduate educational leadership and undergraduate education degree programs of study in colleges throughout Mississippi for inclusion (or exclusion) of gender consciousness.* The current study revealed gender as the most prevailing factor impacting the female superintendents’ personal and professional lives. Yet, these topics were excluded from many undergraduate education and graduate educational leadership programs of study (Nelli, 2014). For future study, I recommend analyzing current and undergraduate and graduate education and educational leadership programs to assess the degree to which gender consciousness is required.

*Analyse impact of professional development/courses related to gendered expectations and inequity on undergraduate and graduate students’ perceptions.* The current study revealed that men and women often ignore or are unaware of the negative impact related to gendered expectations. Offering professional development and/or college courses in education and educational leadership programs with a focus on gender consciousness may positively impact educators’ understanding and increase awareness. I recommend providing awareness sessions for college students followed by conducting a mixed methods study to investigate the impact of the awareness sessions.

**Limitations of the Research**

The results of the study were subject to the following limitations:

1. No focus group interviews were used in this study. Due to geographic limitations, conducting focus group interviews was not feasible. Only individual interviews were used in this study.
2. This study was limited to the study of female leadership in the United States. (Issues elsewhere would likely be distinct from the U.S. experience.)

3. The sample for this study was limited to female superintendents in Mississippi.

4. The study was limited to the study of gender; thus, it did not attend in any great detail to race or socio-economic status.

Researcher Reflection: Mourning the Work

According to Blackmore (1999), “The representation of self emerges as an issue in the messy nexus of research, theory, and feminist practice” (p. 62). Indeed, over the past 18 months, this research study captured my heart and consumed my thoughts. As I reflected on who I was before I began this journey, I realized the degree to which this work challenged my own previously held assumptions regarding the degree to which gender impacted my life. Without question, I am no longer the “me” I was before I traveled this journey. For the purposes of this reflective piece, I used Derrida’s (1994) practice of “philosophical mourning” (as cited in Skrla, 2000, p. 611) to reflect upon the impact of my own experiences over the past 18 months. According to Lather (1998):

The work of mourning is what follows in the wake of understanding that concepts no longer fulfill their promise…Once concepts have been troubled or problematized, we must work to recuperate our thinking. The new thinking, though, will inevitably bear the traces of the concepts, the thinking that came before, even if the concepts and thinking have been deconstructed. (p. 611)

The concept of philosophical mourning is different than the traditional definition of mourning, typically associated with grief or sadness (Lather, 1999; Skrla, 2000).

Traditionally, the process of philosophical mourning offered research participants and the
researcher opportunities to discuss and reflect upon the overall research process itself, along with the study’s findings; thus, often offering opportunities for both the researcher and participants to assimilate new understandings and emerge with new philosophies (Skrla, 2000). For this study, however, I adapted the process and included only my own thoughts regarding how this study altered previously held views. The mourning of the work was definitely not a linear process; instead, I was repeatedly forced to revisit previously held beliefs, constantly shifting my own thinking, resulting in deeper understandings of the challenges associated with gendered expectations. Cornell (1992) emphasized the value of this recursive process stating, “The future, beyond, is revealed in the remembrance of the remains, the chance for the future, in other words, is preserved in the work of mourning” (p. 75). I found this to be very true as I reflected on my own experiences and compared them with the literature and the data collected in the interviews.

*Mourning the Work: Changing My Own Paradigm*

When I began this research study, I was generally ignorant of the existence of gender-related biases. I believed, with all my heart that I could achieve any goal I set for myself, and my only barrier was the degree of effort I was willing to put forth. As I shared in my positionality statement, my mother, a single parent in the 1960s, raised me to believe I was capable of achieving anything, and she accepted nothing less than my best. I was wrong. When I moved from principal to assistant superintendent, I began to notice the significant underrepresentation of women as superintendents. This was the very beginning of my awareness of the gendered nature of the superintendency. Yet, I simply accepted the fact that there were so few female superintendents as “just the way
things were.” When my superintendent suddenly decided to retire, I decided to apply for the position. It was during this time that I recognized the significant role gender plays in women accessing greater opportunities. Within this same time frame, I had begun initial work for this research study; yet, even though I was very familiar with the literature related to the underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi, I had no concept of the challenges I would face throughout the application process for the superintendency. As soon as my interest in the superintendent’s position became public knowledge, I was swept into a world of conflict, chaos, and uncertainty. Because of my own extensive reading and writing in preparation for this study, I understood exactly what was occurring, but understanding did not lessen my disbelief and disappointment. I shared these experiences with my closest colleagues and became fully aware that I was indeed “walking in the footsteps of my own dissertation.” As events unfolded regarding the selection process, I watched as many of the barriers reported in the literature unfolded right before me. The collapse of my own personal paradigm regarding the “way things are” forced me into recognizing the existence of a different, much more complex reality, where gender often determines whether doors to new opportunities are held wide open or simply slammed in your face.

*Mourning the Work: Accessing the Superintendency – “The Right Fit”*

In addition to shifting my own paradigm related to the sheer existence of gender bias, the findings of this study also changed my beliefs regarding factors associated with women gaining access to the superintendency. Prior to this experience, I fully believed that employment opportunities for advancement were based on an individual’s work ethic and level of qualifications for the job. As I neared the final stages of my research, I
decided to apply for another superintendent’s position in a school district in Mississippi. I understood, from the beginning, that the previous superintendent exited under unusual circumstances. Yet, I was attracted to the district for other reasons. For example, the student population within the district was significantly smaller than my previous experiences, and I perceived this as an opportunity to gain experience as a superintendent, in a less stressful environment (than a larger district). In addition, based upon my previous administrative experiences, I was confident that I was adequately qualified. I submitted all of the necessary paperwork for the application process, and I interviewed with the school board. The interview itself was very beneficial in that it gave me further confidence in my abilities to meet the requirements of the superintendency. When asked questions related to finances, personnel, leadership philosophy, and curriculum and instruction, I responded with confidence. In fact, my prior experiences, in each of these areas provided me with a well-rounded knowledge base required for the superintendency. The evening following the interview, I received a call from a board member informing me that they decided to go with another candidate because he was a “better fit.” In fact, the “fit” outweighed the qualifications. Compared to my own qualifications, the selected candidate held only a master’s degree, had fewer years of experience in both education and administration, and no administrative experience beyond the principalship.

In many of my interviews with the female superintendents, they stated that their own selection, as superintendent, related to timing and being “the right fit.” As a result of my own experiences, and those shared by the female superintendents, I shifted my previous beliefs regarding gaining access to the superintendency. Initially, I believed that
qualifications and experience were significant factors in being selected as superintendent. However, in the process of “mourning the work,” I questioned my original beliefs. Knowing men historically defined the expectations of the superintendency, and that men continue to dominate these positions, I wondered how many school boards would actually visualize a woman as the “right fit.” Also, recognizing the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi, I questioned the degree to which this practice, looking for the “right fit” impacted other women’s attempts to access the superintendency, and does the “right fit” represent the emergence of a new practice used to justify questionable, potentially biased hiring practices? My own research throughout this study, along with my experiences, added to my own personal “mourning of the work,” altering my beliefs related to the preparation, qualifications, and selection process for the superintendency.

*Mourning the Work: A New Journey Begins*

I am no longer the “me” I was before this research project. I cannot return to the safe world where I existed before experiencing first-hand the challenges associated with gender bias. The understandings I gained, through my own experiences and those of the female superintendents, revealed an urgent need for both men and women to stop denying the existence of a problem and to join together to take action in making needed changes. As Emma Watson (2014) stated, “If not us, who? If not now, when?” The time is now. The journey begins, even if it must begin with me.

Summary

Gender Inequity in the Representation of Women as Superintendents in Mississippi Public Schools: The “No Problem Problem” revealed the continuing presence
of gendered beliefs and expectations as the prevailing factor negatively impacting women’s access to the superintendency in Mississippi public schools. The qualitative research design used feminist theory, along with feminist poststructuralist, and feminist standpoint theoretical frameworks as a lens through which the women’s experiences were interpreted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 female superintendents in Mississippi with the purpose of understanding the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in the K-12 education setting. In addition, the study investigated the female superintendents’ perceptions related to barriers, while also studying perceived dispositions, attitudes, and practices demonstrated by the women. Even though the women reported gender-role expectations, the Good Ole Boys’ Club, and the glass ceiling as significant hindrances to their success as superintendents, gender discrimination emerged as the most prevailing barrier. In other words, discrimination based on gender significantly impacted every facet of the women’s lives, including their interaction with the superintendency. The reported hindrances were simply the manifestations of underlying gender discrimination. In addition, the female superintendents shared similar belief systems, leadership practices, and they perceived access to mentors as facilitators for their success. In conclusion, failure to recognize and address the continuing underrepresentation of women as superintendents in Mississippi remains a problem. Instead of continuing attempts to address the manifestations of gendered expectations, educators, both male and female, must acknowledge the negative impact of gendered expectations for both men and women. Revealing these truths, then, opens the door for emergence of a new paradigm where men and women in leadership
roles, such as the superintendency, lead as equal partners, rather than continuing to perpetuate the traditional struggle for power.
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 15022501
PROJECT TITLE: Gender Inequity in the Representation of Women as Superintendents in Mississippi Public Schools: The No Problem-Problem
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Deidre Seale Smith
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership and School Counseling
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 02/26/2015 to 02/25/2016
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX B

FORMAL EMAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Dear Superintendent __________________:

My name is Deidre Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Counseling program at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am writing this email to invite you to participate in an interview for a research project titled, “Gender Inequity in the Representation of Women as Superintendents in Mississippi Public Schools: The No Problem Problem”. The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the phenomenon of the small numbers of women currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi. This study will seek to understand perceived barriers facing women who are currently serving as superintendents in the K-12 education setting in Mississippi. Also, a secondary purpose of the study is to understand perceived traits, dispositions, and practices of women currently leading school districts in Mississippi.

The interviews for this study will be conducted in March and April of 2015. In order to be respectful of your time, the interview for this study will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled at the time and location of your choice. If it is impossible to conduct the interview in a face-to-face meeting, we can set up a phone conference or Skype session.

The project has been reviewed and approved by The University of Southern Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. I have attached the informed consent form for this study, which will provide you with a more detailed description of this study and information pertaining to the measures that will be used to ensure participants’ confidentiality and anonymity. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 601-466-6917 (cell) or deidre.smith@eagles.usm.edu. In addition, you may contact the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Leslie Locke, at 601-266-4579, or leslie.locke@usm.edu.

If you are willing to participate in an interview for this study, please respond to this email with the name and email address of a contact person that I should contact in order to schedule a time for an interview appointment with you. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Deidre Joy Seale Smith
APPENDIX C

ORAL PRESENTATION GUIDELINES

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to understand the phenomenon of the small numbers of women currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi. The study will seek to understand the perceived barriers facing these women superintendents. This research is being performed to further support the current body of research related to challenges that Mississippi’s women superintendents experience. The results will be used to provide additional information regarding perceived barriers and to understand perceived traits, dispositions, and practices of women who are currently serving as superintendents in Mississippi’s K-12 public schools. The results will be used to potentially spur further research regarding successful strategies that women superintendents may implement to address the barriers.

Description of Study: The researcher will interview each participant in the study. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded. This recording will be transcribed and coded to determine reoccurring themes.

Benefits: Participants in the study will receive no payment or incentives for their participation. Adding to the current knowledge base regarding perceived barriers that women superintendents in Mississippi encounter will benefit the participants and future women superintendents in addressing some of the barriers identified.

Risks: There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. Anticipated risks from participation are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Participation is absolutely voluntary.

Confidentiality: Participants will be identified using a pseudonym. At no time will their identity be disclosed. The recordings and transcriptions from the interviews will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home.

Alternative Procedures: In the event that a participant is unable to meet face-to-face at the scheduled time for the interview, the researcher will make alternative arrangements to accommodate the needs of the interviewee.

Participant’s Assurance: This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at (601)266-6820. Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. Any questions about the research should be directed to Deidre Smith at (601)466-6917 (cell), or deidre.smith@eagles.usm.edu. In addition, you may contact the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Leslie Locke, at (601)266-4579, or leslie.locke@usm.edu.

Signature of Person Giving Oral Presentation

Date
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI
AUTHORIZATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

Participant’s Name___________________________________________________

Consent is hereby given to participate in the research project entitled GENDER INEQUITY IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AS SUPERINTENDENTS IN MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE NO PROBLEM PROBLEM. All procedures and/or investigations to be followed and their purpose, including any experimental procedures, were explained by Deidre Smith. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected.

The opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and procedures was given. Participation in the project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect the willingness to continue participation in the project.

Questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, should be directed to Deidre Smith at (601)466-6917 and Dr. Leslie Locke at (601)266-4579. This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601)266-5997.

A copy of this form will be given to the participant.

___________________________________________________  ____________________
Signature of participant Date

___________________________________________________  ____________________
Signature of person explaining the study Date
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

District Information

General location within Mississippi: (north, south, coastal, and so on)

Number of students in district:

Accountability rating of district (2013-2014):

Free/Reduced Rate:

Introductions:

1. Tell me about your career, beginning with your first position in the field of education.
   - Years of experience
   - Level of education

2. Describe the factors that influenced your career path.
   - Previous teaching experience
   - Previous administrative experience
   - Factors and/or individuals that impacted your decision to become an administrator.

Career Path:

3. Describe your journey to the superintendency.
   - When and why did you decide to pursue the superintendency?
   - How many superintendent positions did you seek before you obtained your first superintendency?
   - Was there someone, in particular, who inspired you to apply for the superintendency? If so, how did they inspire you?
• How many years have you been a superintendent?

• Were you promoted through the ranks within the district or hired from outside?

• Did you serve as a superintendent before your current position? If so, how long were you in that position?

• Based upon your experiences, what career path is most widely associated with women who have moved into the superintendency?

• Describe the reactions of your family, friends, and colleagues when they learned that you were pursuing the superintendency.

• What challenges did you encounter as you pursued the position of superintendent?

Receiving Support as a Female Superintendent:

4. Do you feel that you have received adequate support in order to be successful, as a woman superintendent?

• How do you balance the responsibilities that you have as a wife and/or mother with the significant responsibilities associated with serving as a superintendent? (If applicable)

• Describe the division of responsibilities at home between you and your spouse. (If applicable)

• Have you been provided support from a mentor? Describe this experience and its influence on your success?

Political Barriers:

5. The superintendency is a political role. What experiences have you had that were driven by politics associated with the superintendency?

• What political barriers have you experienced, and how have you handled these?
In terms of your relationships with the school board, your community, and other stakeholders, do you feel that dealing with the politics of the superintendency is a strength or a weakness for you? Please explain.

**Gender Role Stereotypes:**

6. What stereotypes, if any, related to being a woman superintendent, have you encountered during your tenure as superintendent?

- Do you feel that there are differing societal expectations for women and men in leadership roles such as the superintendency? If yes, please explain.

**Historical Barriers:**

Some barriers related to women in the superintendency have been repeatedly discussed within the literature. For the purposes of this study, these barriers are referred to as historical barriers.

- An example of a historical barrier for women seeking the superintendency is called the glass ceiling. Based upon your experiences, do you feel that a glass ceiling still exists for women aspiring to become a superintendent? Explain.

- What experiences, if any, have you encountered with the Good Ole Boys’ Club?

**Personal Reflections:**

7. Describe yourself as a leader.

- What are your strengths, weaknesses?

- How would you describe your leadership style?

- How do you think the stakeholders of this district would describe you, as a leader?
• As superintendent, what has been your proudest moment; your most challenging/stressful moment?

• What do you think is essential for women to know when they decide to seek the superintendency?

Superintendents’ Leadership Focus:

8. As superintendent, what are your primary areas of focus in your school district?

• What do you perceive as your greatest challenges?

• What do you perceive as your greatest opportunities?

• What process do you use in making decisions, both large and small, within your district?
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