Gender Bias Within the Superintendency: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT: Current research reveals a large percentage of teaching positions and administrative services credentials are held by women, although historically, men dominate the superintendent role. Specifically in the area of women in the superintendency, a discrepancy exists between men and women in recruitment practices, types of barriers and challenges, and the length of time one stays in the superintendent position. This study examines the superintendent role and the perceived leadership qualities necessary, barriers, challenges and opportunities, as well as the career pathway taken by those in the superintendent role. With a mixed-method design, the study reflects upon responses from six superintendents, three women and three men, using semi-structured interview questions and data collected with Bolman and Deal's (1990) Leadership Orientations (Self) Instrument and a demographics survey. A theoretical framework of management and leadership styles was utilized to analyze the data for themes relating to the three research questions. The findings generally indicated women superintendents perceive they are expected to act and behave differently to succeed in the role, while men are more at ease with making decisions and leading others. Gender biases were found to be prevalent for women, as the role of parenthood was the biggest barrier when considering their career pathway. This was not found to be a barrier for men.

Keywords: Professional learning, induction, inquiry, experiential learning, Common Core.

According to the American Association of School Administrators, in 2010, approximately 24.1% of American superintendents were female (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). This number was a substantial improvement since the last time it was measured in 2000, when only 13.2% were women. Although women comprise the majority of classified staff and teachers in the P-12 education system (in 2011-2012, 76% of public school teachers were female as indicated by a 2011-2012 report by the U.S. Department of Education), males held just under 80% of the superintendent positions. A few recent studies on women superintendents (Derrington & Sharatt, 2009; Muñoz, Pankake, Murakami, & Simonsson, 2014; Sperandio & Devdas, 2014) describe the current issues female leaders are facing, which includes personal issues such as marriage, children, and relocation as well as professional challenges such as opportunity and gender bias. Obtaining the position of the superintendent is challenging enough without having to navigate external factors that women are currently subject to enduring. Women are often typecast as teachers or other personnel, making the pressure to exceed that first impression even greater (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Barriers

There are certain unwritten rules for women for obtaining a superintendent position. Tallerico (2000) explained, "These unwritten rules involve headhunters' and school board members' (a) defining quality in terms of hierarchies of particular job titles, (b) stereotyping by gender, (c) complacency about acting affirmatively, and (d) hypervaluing feelings of comfort and interpersonal chemistry with the successful candidate" (p. 37). Understanding the potential issues, both known and unknown, can help break down barriers to ensure that every candidate, female

or male, has an equitable opportunity to become a superintendent.

The underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and the possible reasons attributed with it requires additional research. Studies have shown that it is not the lack of training or experience necessary to succeed in the position that has led to the underrepresentation of female superintendents, but rather societal norms and beliefs regarding leadership, (Shakeshaft, 1989), school board expectations (Tallerico, 2000) and issues with the overall search and selection processes. Selection process issues include school boards not considering female candidates for positions, lack of mobility, and perceptions held by school board members that women are unqualified for the responsibilities of the position (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

One barrier women face as they move to the superintendency is the attitudes of gatekeepers. In this context, gatekeepers are defined as school board members who help to hire women superintendents and consultants working in superintendency searches who place women among the top candidates for superintendent positions (Chase & Bell, 1990). In a study by Chase and Bell (1990), the ideologies and discourse of individual achievement and gender neutrality were examined by exploring the explanations and descriptions of women's actions and situations as told by the gatekeepers. Little attention had been paid to gatekeepers' experiences and perspectives in relation to women in positions of power. The focus of studying gatekeepers' speech was on "how gatekeepers talk about women, that is, on the kinds of understandings about women's actions and situations that are produced by gatekeepers' speech" (Chase & Bell, 1990, p. 164). Research supports the fact that there are qualified women who enjoy the work and have the expertise to lead systems who are actively seeking the superintendency (Grogan & Brunner, 2005); however, the gatekeepers––school board members and search firms––are not hiring women at the same rate as men.

Another barrier involves headhunting, gender, and color. Tallerico (2000) explored the process of filling the position of superintendency from a gatekeeping and career mobility theory while looking specifically at gender and color. The idea of head hunting ties into the gatekeeping theory because headhunters may be able to personally control portions of the hiring process early on (i.e., the initial paper screening). They have the power to control who proceeds at various levels of the hiring process. There are three major categories in this area of inquiry. First, although there are guidelines on which a candidate is evaluated, they

are viewed differently based on the positions the candidate has previously held. This impacts women and people of color because these two groups are more likely to hold principalships at an elementary school than at the secondary levels (Tallerico, 2000). Cultural norms also play a role and prejudicial gender stereotyping does exist. Specifically females are often assumed to lack prior knowledge about particular issues related to the superintendency. Male candidates are expected to understand appropriate disciplinary actions, budgeting, and other non-instructional technical abilities, while the competencies of women are questioned. If a woman does make it as a finalist, the school board often questions whether they need to pay her as much as a male contender (Tallerico, 2000). The third category inquires about how a school board makes selection decisions. Many of the participants involved in the interviews described the chemistry or connection they feel with a candidate as crucial. Psychologically, humans are more likely to connect with others who are similar to them (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). This means that this 'fit' being assessed is more than likely to push women and people of color out of the position (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983).

Breaking Barriers and Challenging Life Styles

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) offered several suggestions for overcoming the continuous struggles female superintendents face. The strategies fall under four subcategories: resolve, balance, negotiate, and decide. To cultivate resolve, individuals need to be clear about professional and personal goals, stick to career goals and develop an action plan, and realize that sacrifice is necessary while determining limitations. In order to maintain balance, it is important for women to take care of their health, seek the advice of women who have created balance, and accept assignments that allow family participation. Women may also need to consider negotiating boundaries or ask for alternatives such as negotiating flexible time with their school board or compromising expectations with the board before making strong decisions.

Life choices. Sperandio and Devdas (2014) discussed the idea that women seeking superintendent positions must consider life factors their male counterparts may not face. Many women would not consider relocating or committing to a long commute in order to access a position that may further their career goals. In their study, 71 of the 109 respondents indicated they considered their spouse and their career or current position as either important or very important when deciding whether to take a superintendent position. The respondents continued to handle much of the domestic responsibility independently or with

very little help from their family or paid help. The findings indicate the responsibilities of a superintendent and lifestyle preferences of women who are qualified to take these positions are at odds, making it more difficult for women to obtain these positions. This in turn makes it more challenging to close the gender gap that exists in the position of superintendent and the gender balance in educational decisions that are made within school districts. The problem becomes more complex due to the realization that the responsibilities of the superintendent are unlikely to change, meaning women may continue to be faced with these challenging decisions between career and home life.

Although many studies have looked at leadership traits of superintendents, few have focused on gender biases that exist in this important leadership position. The current study used three research questions to address this this gap in the literature:

> 1) What are the leadership qualities that a superintendent needs to possess to have a successful tenure?

> 2) What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are experienced in the role of superintendent?

> 3) What commonalities exist as it relates to the career pathway towards becoming a superintendent?

Methods

Participants

Six superintendents (n = 6), all from Southern California, participated in this study. Five participants were currently serving as superintendent and one was retired. Three participants were female and three were male. Participants ranged between 41 and 61 years of age, with a male being the youngest and a female being the oldest. Of the six participants, three reported being married (two females and one male), two reported being single (one female and one male), and one reported being divorced (male). All participants reported they had children, with no participant having more than three. The age of their children ranged from 22 months to 39 years old, with a male having the youngest child and a female having the oldest child. The participants served districts ranging from 2,600 to 18,000 students, with a male leading the smallest district and a female leading the largest district. Five superintendents represented elementary school districts (non-unified), while one represented a unified district that included high schools. All of the participants held doctoral degrees. Superintendent

tenure length ranged from five months to fourteen years, with females holding both the shortest and longest tenure.

Instrumentation

Bolman and Deal's (1990) Leadership Orientation (Self) Instrument (LOI), considered a valid and reliable instrument, was used as the main instrument of the study. Proposed in 1984, the Bolman and Deal leadership model has been widely accepted in organizational theory and applied to various organizations across an extensive time period. Bolman and Deal's (1990) model provides four specific frameworks: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The four frameworks provide structure that leaders can employ to gain a better understanding of challenging situations. The authors believed reframing offers leaders "a chance to get beyond constricted, oversimplified views of leadership" and provides four distinct lenses through which each situation may be perceived (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 355).

According to Bolman and Deal (2013), the structural leader acts as the architect of the organization, focusing mainly on "task, facts, and logic, rather than personal limitation or liability" (p. 325). The human resource leader is a catalyst, acting as a facilitator in the organization to "advocate openness, caring, mutuality, listening, coaching, participation, and empowerment" (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 360). The task of the political frame leader is to be an advocate who will "recognize major constituencies, develop ties to their leadership, and manage conflict as productively as possible" (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 329). Lastly, the symbolic frame encourages leaders to act as a prophet with the task of inspiring workers. The authors propose several distinct features of today's leadership, noting that it is a multilateral, distributed activity that is contextual and situated in the exchange between the leader and constituents. But far from simplistic, many individuals fall into a combination of the frames. The structural and human resource frames are related to managerial effectiveness, while the political and symbolic frames are related to leadership effectiveness.

Permission to use the LOI was obtained from the author prior to starting the data collection process. Although the LOI has three sections, only the first section was used for analysis. This section consists of 32 Likert scale items that allows individuals to assess their own leadership skills. The results generate four scores for each participant––one for each of the four frames described above. A score of 32 or above or an average score above 4.0 indicates a preference for a frame. To obtain the frame frequency distribution,

each superintendent's scores for the frame were averaged. Lastly, the entire group's scores were averaged, and the statistical results were distributed across the four leadership frames.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and a survey using Bolman and Deal's (1990) LOI. Each participant received a phone call or an email and was invited to be interviewed. Upon agreement, individual in-person interviews were set up between the participant and at least two researchers to discuss the research questions presented in this study. Participants were also asked to complete a short demographic survey prior to the LOI. Each interview was recorded with the participant's permission. The researchers also took handwritten notes.

Qualitative data was manually transcribed to give the researchers an opportunity to become deeply familiar with the source material. Through a manual coding process, transcriptions were open, axial, and finally selective coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Emergent themes were identified and then grouped together and described in rich descriptive text.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis is another tool used to analyze the results of our study. SWOT is one way to examine the environment around an issue or institution (Balamuralikrishna & Dugger, 1995). This strategic planning activity has been in practice since the 1950s (DeSilets, 2008) and allows organizations to explore their interconnections prior to making decisions or changes.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this study are separated into three sections, addressing each of the three research questions. Each section looks at the female responses, male responses, and finally a comparison of the female and male responses. The themes that emerged from the female interviews include communication, soft language, relationships, vision, and the implications of being a female superintendent. The theme that emerged from the male interviews was a unique approach to the position of superintendency. The female participants had multiple areas of overlap, using similar terms, language, and similar experiences. Conversely, each male participant had very unique responses that did not contain overlap similar to their female counterparts. As reported in the findings, the responses from each participant highlight these themes.

Research Question 1: What are the leadership qualities that a superintendent needs to possess to have a successful tenure?

Female Responses

The responses of the female participants to the first research question were analyzed and divided into four themes: *communication*, *relationships*, *vision*, and *overall female superintendent issues*.

Communication. Communication was discussed throughout all of the female interviews. The ability to communicate was examined in regards to organizational (i.e., the vision and mission, staff, faculty, etc.) and interpersonal needs. In addition, the other female superintendents discussed spending much of their day "just talking to people." Whether it was about a bad day or layoffs, they needed to hear people out and have the ability to facilitate two-way communication. This was an overarching theme evident throughout the female superintendent interviews.

In considering the topics of communication and leadership, Participant 1 stated, "You need the ability to communicate the vision and the mission of the organization, need the ability to articulate that vision." Participant 2 added, "You need to be caring, communicate extremely well, and need to be very good at multitasking. The communication is number one."

Participant 3 discussed the importance of communication with her school board. She was the predecessor to a male superintendent who held the position for 33 years. She described the prior superintendent as "legendary" and talked candidly about communicating with the board, her staff, and the community. She attributed much of her success in the district to open communication:

> It goes back to communication. I communicate everything with that board. And they are shocked; they've never had it before. They are well informed. There are no surprises . . . If there is something coming up, I tell my cabinet team [that] you need to write a transmittal. This is what we need to do. It is a whole cultural shift to bring to the district to ensure that people are communicating.

Soft language. Related to communication was the theme soft language. The female superintendents did not feel they could give a direct order or request. Instead they felt required to "front load" their board members and constituents. In order to effectively convey their message, word choice and tone needed to be considered and specifically selected for each audience. The female superintendents felt their communication

styles were effective, as they achieved success in their tenure as superintendents; however, this required extensive thought, effort, and understanding of what they were asking as leaders. They understood the dynamics they were entering and found effective ways to ensure the correct processes were being implemented.

Reflecting upon the topics of soft language and leadership, Participant 2 recalled the following when working with her male-dominated executive cabinet:

> I remember once, I said right in the beginning: 'You know, you might want to consider' or 'Have you ever thought about,' 'I would encourage you to.' And after I had done that, all of them said, oh my gosh, that's your way of telling us what to do. And I said, actually, you're right. And I laughed about that.

Participant 3 added, "How you project as a female to men to get your point across has to be orchestrated well, it has to be strategic." This participant provided an example: "I always told a story and I always told my team and my directors, 'Tell me ahead of time so I can front load them two to three weeks in advance.' And then I would tell them, 'I just want you to know that this is what was going on . . . this might be coming.' "

Relationships. Another evident theme was the need to build relationships. Each female described the importance of relationships with groups ranging from their day-to-day staff to outside colleagues they needed to call on for help. Relationships were at the core of the work each superintendent was doing and continued to be a vital part of the success of each female leader. This theme aligns with Bolman and Deal's (2013) Human Resources Framework. The relationships theme emerged through the interviews, even beyond the initial question of leadership qualities. The female participants spoke highly of their teams and how they benefitted from building close, working relationships. As one female mentioned, much of her day was spent talking to people. She described how this is still a hard concept for her to grasp because her prior job required paperwork and completing multiple reports, resulting in something tangible to show for each day. The superintendent described her understanding that while there was no need to produce a report, building relationships helped her do a better job. Each female superintendent felt her relationships were a vital part of their current or prior successes.

Participant 1 noted the following on the topics of relationships and leadership: "You also need strong interpersonal skills. This is really imperative. So much of my day is just talking to people." Participant 3 mentioned the importance of relationships in helping to build resources. Participant 2 confirmed this notion by adding, "The superintendent has to have a strong ability to build established relationships, rapport, confidence, and trust with the people she/he serves . . . It's all about building that relationship, that of trust."

Vision. The theme vision arose as an early indicator of what female superintendents felt was an important quality of being successful. Senge's (1990) *Fifth Discipline* discusses the importance of vision when leading an organization and being aware of how an individual vision may or may not support an organization. Each superintendent emphasized that it was not their personal ideals that were of most concern, but those of the students they were serving that should be most important. They each discussed their own visions helping to guide their decisions, especially those that were difficult to make. It is important to note that while their personal vision was not what drove their decisions, they chose organizations that aligned to those visions. They worked with organizations that had similar principles, values, and ideas so they were comfortable with the mission they were perpetuating. The idea of visionary leadership supports Bolman and Deal's (2013) Symbolic Framework. Each female interviewee was connected to their district without losing sight of doing work that was important to each of them.

In considering vision and leadership, Participants 2 and 3 remarked on the importance of being a visionary. Participant 2 highlighted the value of the superintendent being someone who "really understands the qualities of leadership" and can "inspire and motivate others to not only come on board but to share in the vision." She provided an example of this by stating,

> I am a firm believer in vision and mission and guiding principles in an organization . . . I would say things a thousand times and I would repeat things that would just affirm the values of the organization . . . When it came to making those tough decisions we could sit back and say okay, this was what we said we believed so it seems to me like the answer is really clear, but I am hearing from all of you that this is not what we believe so we need to change our actions because we can't say we believe this, but then do something different.

Participant 1 spoke of the daunting task of establishing a shared mission and vision: "It was about 30 people in total and we worked to create the vision and

mission for the entire district. We spent so much time on identifying the right words or phrases to use."

Issues. The female participants expressed areas that were issues specifically related to being a female superintendent. Their experiences corresponded to those experiences documented in the literature review. Their direct quotes demonstrate the issues, perceived or real, that women in leadership positions face. Along with the challenges of the job, female superintendents are tasked with possessing a strong sense of self and the ability to depersonalize some of their experiences. One female participant shared her experience of being evaluated on her professional dress––an area her male predecessors had never been evaluated on. These responses imply that female superintendents require skills to know what it means to be a female superintendent

Participant 2, who was the first female superintendent of her district (16 years prior), talked about the challenges of her experience. When attending conferences, she described being directed to the teacher gathering area and garnering surprised reactions from attendees when she declared her superintendent position. She often felt like she had to prove herself and her strength, as she described a scenario in which she was asked by a female board member to be "more of a boss." Participant 2 went on to ask the board member for clarification by stating, "So what I'm really hearing from you is that you want me to slam my fist down once in a while and yell at someone periodically, and she said, 'Yea, be more of a boss . . . ' That's just one example of what I had. I have stories, and stories like that, that were interesting, that I knew if I were a male, I wouldn't be dealing with."

Participant 1 spoke of the challenges of being a female superintendent and the societal expectation regarding familial obligation that are traditionally placed on women. When considering the acceptance of the superintendent position, Participant 1 recalled a conversation she had with her former boss:

> When I was looking at moving into the superintendent position, my former boss told me I didn't want to work in a district with a high school. My youngest is seven years old. He said I would be away at events every night, and he is still so young. I knew I wasn't willing to give up that time with him. He is still so young so that impacted my decision in terms of moving into this role.

Participant 3 spoke of the importance of self-talk in monitoring personal moods and emotions during interpersonal relationships within the workplace:

> One of the first things I believe in and tell my staff is that as a leader, you don't have a right to wake up in the morning in a bad mood. You can be in a bad mood, but you go do it somewhere else, cannot show your team that. There are days, trust me that I am down. But I don't allow myself to be projected out. I catch myself, so I constantly self-talk myself. Put myself in check. I started this as an assistant superintendent. Especially for women, you have to self-talk, all the time; it never goes away. You have to put yourself in check all the time.

Male Responses

Male participants did not display any overlapping themes for leadership qualities needed for the superintendent position. However, the male responses did provide insight into their unique perspectives on the necessary skills required to be a successful superintendent. The participants' distinctive responses demonstrate how each male had a unique approach to successful leadership.

The participants' responses aligned with Bolman and Deal's (2013) Structural Framework. In general, the male participants were action-oriented and focused on the organization as a whole. They presented skills that were fairly concrete and tangible. Participant 6 explained that leader success requires having a concrete purpose and commitment. Alternatively, Participant 5 focused on the importance of being able to make a decision, as he described the need to "take some action to make those things happen over time," but also being flexible when things do not work out.

Participant 4 stressed the importance of knowing yourself:

> So the first thing I think of is kind of know thyself. So you know you never completely know yourself. But I think knowing what attributes and characteristics you have and how those things might relate to the structural generic position of superintendent is important, but you don't know that until you actually do the job. . . . So really developing understanding of yourself and understanding of the organization.

Additionally, Participant 4 spoke of the importance of stability of leadership for the success of an organization, noting a strong correlation between the duration of the position held and "educational performance in particular towards transformational change." As demonstrated, each participant's responses were ex-

clusive to his perspective for the position of superintendent.

Comparison of Responses

In reviewing the themes that emerged from the interviews, the responses differed from female to male. The first difference is in the topics discussed. The females' comments did have reoccurring themes, while the males' comments did not. While this is a surprising finding, the data indicate that the males have a broad number of topics to discuss and therefore the data did not overlap. Many of the qualities the females participants discussed were interpersonal in nature and people-centered, which aligns with Bolman and Deal's (2013) Human Resource Framework. While each female superintendent had her own approach to leadership, each perceived the necessary qualities to be a leader similarly. In contrast, the males interviewed had little to no overlap in their perception of qualities needed to be successful as a superintendent. While there was some discussion of personal qualities by the male participants, many of the qualities were related to the organization and overall success. The difference in responses clearly demonstrates the distinction in perceived leadership qualities between males and females. All six interviewees either held or were currently holding the same position, in a relatively small radius of geographic location, and yet presented very different qualities needed for superintendent success.

Leadership Qualities as Assessed Through Bolman and Deal

Bolman and Deal's (1990) LOI provided additional information about participants' leadership qualities. Based on the results, many superintendents in this study utilized a multi-frame approach. The participants' means were highest for the Human Resources Framework, followed by the Symbolic Framework. The Structural and Political Frames were low scoring, which indicates that they are not as heavily utilized as the other two frames.

Research Question 2: What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are experienced in the role of superintendent?

The analysis of an organization is a crucial step in the discovery process. SWOT analysis is one tool that has been a simple yet effective framework, allowing organizational features to quickly be defined as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. For the purpose of this case study, a SWOT analysis was utilized to review the responses of those interviewed to discover common emergent themes. This was done to provide deeper insight into understanding the var-

ying perspectives that males and females feel in their role as superintendent.

Female Responses

Findings from the SWOT analysis uncovered common themes within the female participants (Figure 1). These themes were identified as *communication*, *relationships*, *vision*, and *gender issues*. Several internal strengths emerged while reviewing the participants' responses through the SWOT. *Communication*, *relationships*, and *vision* were identified as strengths and opportunities for female superintendents. Communicating the needs of the organization, being in cohesion with the board of trustees, and communicating a culture of care were highlighted as strengths. However, communicating the differing opinions of individuals and overturning established practices were both defined as weaknesses.

Participants noted the importance of building relationships inside and outside the organization. Relationships were identified as trusting others, finding balance, and celebrating others' successes. However, the relationship with the board of trustees was also perceived as a potential threat and opportunity. One superintendent pointed out, "When you're able to highlight your board of trustees and establish trust within your relationship, you're able to be more impactful within the organization."

The development and establishment of a cohesive vision within the organization of the district was noted as a strength and opportunity. One superintendent stated she was a firm believer in vision, mission, and guiding principles within an organization. She also remarked it would be challenging to lead a district if the norms and values of the organization were not clearly articulated.

Gender issues and feelings of inequality were discussed through the interview process. Some female participants perceived gender issues as a weakness. One example of a defined weakness was clearly shown when Participant 2 stated that throughout her career as a superintendent, she felt she had to work harder, show up more, be stronger, and look happier. When partaking in her formal evaluation, a question was posed about how she dressed. Upon reviewing past male superintendents' evaluation questions, dress attire was not an area of review for her male counterparts. Another barrier that a participant felt was when a mentor encouraged her to not be superintendent of a high school district. His rationale for the advice was that he felt running a high school district, and the late night obligations associated with the posi-

tion, was not feasible for a mother with young children.

Male Responses

Similar themes were uncovered for the male participants within the findings from the SWOT analysis (Figure 2). These themes were identified as *communication*, *relationships*, and *vision*. Gender issues and feelings of inequality were not a defined theme from male participants. The importance of communication for the superintendency was defined as a strength, as was making decisions and embracing the responsibility of the position. A weakness, which was noted by more than one participant, was the challenge in changing others' perspectives. Raising the expectations of individuals was also stated as a weakness from more than one participant. In both instances, superintendents described the difficulty in reforming practices that have always been in place, which had not been challenged or changed throughout the years. Encouraging and requiring these changes were viewed as challeng-

es, which we defined as weaknesses within the organization.

Establishing and maintaining relationships within the organization were defined as both a strength and opportunity. One superintendent remarked when you "treat everyone from a board member to a food service worker with the same level of respect, I think that transforms a district and sets the tone that everyone has a seat at the table and everyone's voice will be heard." Another participant stated the importance of being "hard on the issues but soft on people." This resonated a common sentiment of the participants of the importance of building solid relationships within the organization.

The challenge of creating a shared vision within the organization was a perceived weakness to several participants. One superintendent stated he felt people's expectations could be barriers to the organization. Conversely, some superintendents viewed individuals who challenge the system or vision as an opportunity for growth within the organization. They also viewed

INTERNAL	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
	• Leading a team to best serve children • Build culture of care • Establish uniform vision, mission and guiding principles • Implications for decisions that are made that affect the organization as a whole • Communicate the needs of the organization • Building relationships* • Trusting others • Finding balance • Celebrating others successes • Make your barriers your opportunities *reported by more than one interviewee	• Differing opinions • Overturning decisions • Perceived need to do more than male counterparts • Gender inequality from board and community members
EXTERNAL	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	• Impacting 18,000 students each year • Highlight your board of trustees	• Limited resources* • Maintaining cultural practices • Inherited Issues • Very large Organization • Board of trustees* • Legal and financial constraints • Changing legislation • No boss-no one higher up to go to *reported by more than one interviewee

Figure 1. Female superintendent SWOT analysis chart.

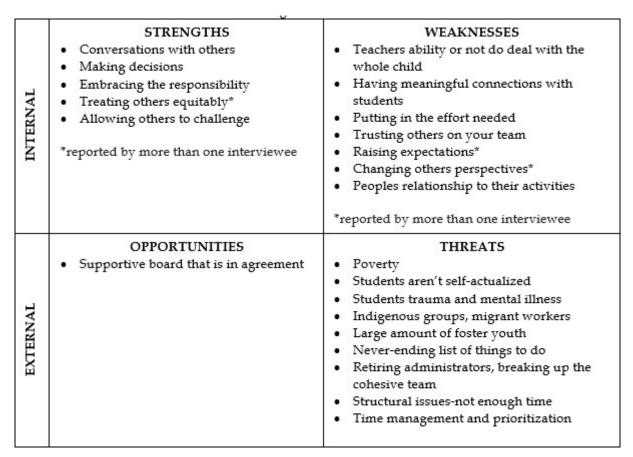|	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
INTERNAL	• Conversations with others • Making decisions • Embracing the responsibility • Treating others equitably* • Allowing others to challenge *reported by more than one interviewee	• Teachers ability or not do deal with the whole child • Having meaningful connections with students • Putting in the effort needed • Trusting others on your team • Raising expectations* • Changing others perspectives* • Peoples relationship to their activities *reported by more than one interviewee
	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
EXTERNAL	• Supportive board that is in agreement	• Poverty • Students aren't self-actualized • Students trauma and mental illness • Indigenous groups, migrant workers • Large amount of foster youth • Never-ending list of things to do • Retiring administrators, breaking up the cohesive team • Structural issues-not enough time • Time management and prioritization

Figure 2. Male superintendent SWOT analysis chart.

those hard-handed decisions and the responsibility that is accompanied with the job as an opportunity.

The male participants were able to define more threats and weaknesses than strengths and opportunities as compared to the female participants. The female participants noted more strengths and opportunities above all others. Additionally, male participants did not recognize gender issues. Communication and relationship building were both identified as areas of strength by both groups of participants. Both groups noted there are opportunities available given their ongoing interactions with the boards of trustees. Both groups also agreed that working with differing opinions, raising expectations, and changing decisions and perspectives were a defined weakness within their organizations. Lastly, the cultural practices of the district and how to approach what has been maintained within the organization were noted as threats.

One obvious theme missing from the male participants as compared to females was the feeling of inequality and gender issues. None of the male participants recognized any threats or weaknesses of being a male superintendent, whereas several of the female participants noted feelings of inequality being a female and the challenges accompanied with serving as

superintendent. Although the number of females within the role of superintendent has steadily increased over the past few decades, there continues to be obvious challenges that females face that their male counterparts do not.

Research Question 3: What commonalities exist as it relates to the career pathway towards becoming a superintendent ?

The last area considered in this case study was that of the career pathway of each person interviewed as they worked towards becoming a superintendent. Unlike the responses to previous research questions, the interviewees did not elaborate on their career pathways, thus their responses were concise.

Female Responses

Prior to taking on the role of the superintendent, all three female participants held the positions of teacher, assistant principal, and principal. The female participants all pursued education and did not consider other careers choices.

All three females spoke of the importance of holding different positions leading up to the superintendency. All participants explained that their experiences

in the different positions helped better prepare them for the challenges that they face in the role of superintendent. The amount of time spent in each position was not as important as how effective they were as a leader in those positions. Additionally, the knowledge they were able to gain while serving in prior roles allowed them to be more effective in the educational leadership position.

Male Responses

Similar to the female participants, all three males held the positions of teacher, assistant principal, and principal. While none changed careers mid-life, two of the three did speak of how education was not their original field of study in college. However these two participants expressed their need and desire to make a difference in children's lives as a factor in their ultimate decision to pursue a career in education.

There were no common themes that emerged in the male responses to career pathways when they elaborated on this particular question. One spoke of the need to become more assertive in the leadership role. He spoke about having tough conversations with people and how this was a weakness of his, so to help improve this skill, he sought out a position in human resources to build on this area. He stated he used to be a "fixer," but using his experience in the variety of positions held helped him to understand that it is his job to challenge the barriers of his team. Another spoke about the superintendency as the opportunity for personal growth and the ability to do a million jobs in one. He also said the superintendency provides great opportunity for "scaling," which he described as going from micro-granular to the big picture and back. He sees his role in the bigger picture as making the world a better place. Another spoke of the influence of his father being a migrant farm worker, which caused his family to move around a lot as a child. This personal experience led to a better understanding and appreciation for the struggles and challenges that children of farm workers face each day. He noted that as a superintendent, "you have an opportunity each day to make a difference".

Combined Female and Male Responses and Emergent Themes

While discussing their career pathways, all six participants described an obvious passion for the work they do and displayed a strong commitment to improving school environments and fostering student learning. All six highlighted similar themes of *the importance of knowing thyself, having a defined mission and vision that is developed and shared with the stakeholders,*

and *answering the call to serving and making a difference in the lives of children.*

Limitations

For the findings of this study to be properly understood, they should be considered in the context of their limitations. The researchers were required to complete the study within a limited timeframe, thus resulting in a relatively small sample size of male and female participants. A larger sample size may have provided a more in-depth analysis highlighting additional themes for exploration. Second, because this study relied on self-reported data, it may have been influenced by poor understanding and could be vulnerable to intentional deception that comes from the desire to conform to social expectations. Although our participants seemed to speak candidly in response to the research questions, some may not have felt safe to be forthcoming, resulting in guarded responses.

Implications and Future Research

Issues of gender bias are ever present. When compared to men, women are still perceived as being inferior in both strength and intelligence. Many still fear that women will make decisions based on emotion rather than facts. This is an area that would be worth exploring by further interviewing and surveying multiple stakeholders regarding their perspectives on women in positions of power and their abilities to effectively lead an organization. An additional area for future research is the decision-making process behind a woman's choice of pursuing a high-power educational leadership position such as superintendent. With more men choosing to adopt the role of the stay-at-home parent or follow the non-traditional path and support and accept the woman as the top salary earner, women may begin to feel more inclined to pursue a superintendent position without feeling any sense of guilt in doing so. Lastly, additional areas of research may include expanding the study sample size, comparing urban versus rural school district superintendents, and comparing challenges of women and men seeking administrative roles in higher education. Continued research on this topic will add to the growing knowledge base of female leaders.

Conclusion

The findings from this case study indicate there were no common themes within male and female respondents. Female superintendents gave similar responses to each other and themes of communication, relationships, vision, and ideas of gender bias emerged. The women interviewed described their perceived struggles with being a female in the super-

intendent role. Each male superintendent gave unique responses, but no common themes emerged. Using a SWOT analysis, female participants highlighted more strengths and opportunities of the superintendency than males, while male participants noted more threats and weaknesses. Female participants noted that being a female carried a unique set of challenges, and along with feelings of inequality, acted as a barrier to their leadership position. Male participants did not mention any gender-related concerns.

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