

NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH:  
WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A Dissertation  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

### NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH: WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA (August 2010)

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Women dominate the ranks of teaching, yet men continue to dominate the executive leadership position in public schools, that of superintendent. Fewer than 20% of the public school superintendencies in the nation are held by women. In North Carolina, women hold only 15% of the 117 public school superintendent positions. This study investigated barriers women superintendents in North Carolina encountered in securing the position as well as successful strategies they employed to navigate around the barriers. Resilience and perseverance capacity was investigated as well as career pathways.

Data in this descriptive study were collected via an online survey and from follow-up interviews. Findings from the study revealed conflicting demands of career and family, lack of ability to relocate due to personal commitments, and the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men as significant barriers. Successful strategies for attaining the superintendency were identified as obtaining a doctorate, developing a strong self concept, obtaining family support, learning coping skills to balance demands of career and family, strategically preparing for and broadening district-level experience, increasing flexibility to

relocate, and pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure. The career pathways that led to the superintendency for the participants in this study were complex and multi-directional. The great majority of the participants entered the superintendency from an assistant or associate superintendent position and were in the 40-49 year old range when they secured their first superintendent position.

All of the women superintendents who participated in this study exhibited high levels of resilience and perseverance. Not only did they reveal resilience and perseverance through the data collected by the survey instrument and the interview protocol, their resumes and professional vitae verified their broad and extensive experiences and commitments to long-term goals by achievement of credentials and attainment of multiple leadership positions.

Four themes surfaced from the qualitative data obtained in this study. They were *purpose, perseverance, people, and passion*. Each of the participants used these themes to navigate circuitous paths through a labyrinth of multiple and mysterious routes often lined with obstacles to eventually conclude at the inner circle of executive leadership.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Shirley Davis. Without her encouragement, support, and confidence in me, this accomplishment in my life would have never happened. As far back as I can remember she always encouraged me to do my best, to pursue my dreams, and to believe that anything could be accomplished with hard work and discipline. My mother has been a wonderful role model, a Godly influence, and one of the sources of my strength. I love her dearly and hope to become more of a woman like her.

I dedicate this dissertation to my brother, Dr. Rick Davis. He serves as my accountability partner and motivator in helping me to fulfill my utmost potential. He always expects the best of me and never settles for less when he knows I have more to give. His passions for excellence and for serving others are traits I strive to emulate. He is my brother, my coach, and still yet, my dear friend. I love him and count myself honored and blessed to be called “Dr. Rick’s Sister.”

Most importantly, I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Justin Michael Davis. Because of him, I have been blessed with the noblest title ever, “Mom.” He is my flesh and blood and the very beat of my heart. He is the reason my life has meaning, and I love him more than anything. I hope that my perseverance towards this goal will serve as a reminder to him that anything is possible with persistence and hard work. As always, I wish to remind him to live his life with integrity, passion, and discipline so that he is able to continue to bless the lives of others just as he has blessed mine. Now that I have reached this milestone, I hope that I can become a laid-back, fun-loving, beach-bumming kind of person....just like him!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to the amazing women superintendents that participated in my study and shared their stories. Each one revealed herself to be a courageous and passionate leader as she gave voice to her experiences. I would like to acknowledge the support of my dissertation committee throughout this process. Dr. Ken Jenkins, my chair, has provided constant support, feedback, and encouragement. His unwavering faith in me to accomplish this goal has sustained me through the times when I wasn't sure I could complete it. However, he taught me the difference between "I can" and "I will." For that, I will be eternally grateful! I wish to acknowledge the members of my committee, Dr. Sarah Zimmerman, Dr. Sandra Tonnsen, and Dr. Jim Killacky for their time, feedback, and guidance so graciously offered along the journey.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Public school superintendents are held responsible for the progress and achievements of the students within their districts. They work under intense scrutiny from teachers, parents, board members, elected officials, and the public at large. The executive leadership role is complex and varies from district to district, yet all who assume the position must be experts in financial, operational, and political leadership as well as equipped with skills in leading improvements for teaching and learning (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). School superintendents perform today more than ever in an increasingly high stakes environment full of adversity, yet they must balance administrative teams, school boards, community members, and family obligations. In addition, superintendents are now faced with ever increasing accountability to both state and federal governments while acquiring fewer resources to do the job (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

Superintendents are the Chief Executive Officers of public school districts, and just as in the corporate world, the majority of these positions are held by men. Tallerico (2000) found that the public school superintendency is unique in that it has been the slowest of all K-12 administrative positions to integrate women and people of color. The typical public school superintendent is a married, white male, between 51-55 years old (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

In the early 1900s, the number of women in teaching advanced at a rapid rate (Blount, 1998). By 1920, the overall percentage of women educators peaked at 86% while men held



only 14% of all school positions including supervisory and administrative jobs in the United States. Ella Flagg Young, Chicago Public Schools' superintendent in 1909, as cited in Blount (1998), declared that "Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. . . . [I]t 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" (p. 1). However, her vision has never been actualized.

The current number of women school superintendents nationwide varies from 13% to 18% (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Regardless of the exact number, the scarcity of females in the profession is unquestionable. Theories of hierarchical structures exist that may help explain the causes of the gender discrepancy (Kanter, 1976; Shakeshaft, 1989). Where women find themselves within the organizational structure is extremely important for upward mobility (Skrla, 2000). Skrla noted that some of the structural taxonomies included informal power structures, networking, and mentoring. In addition, some existing barriers cited by women trying to move forward in hierarchical structures to assume the public school superintendency include: lack of encouragement, lack of professional networks, limited access to formal and informal training, exclusion from the "good old boy network," and lack of influential sponsors (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2000).

Age and prior experience are additional disadvantages to women aspiring to the superintendency (Glass, 2000). Women are typically appointed to their first administrative positions later than men. Men usually begin their administrative experience between the ages of 25 and 30 whereas women are appointed to administrative positions when they are between the ages of 31 and 40. Women spend an average of fifteen years in the classroom

before seeking an administrative position; men spend an average of five years. School boards are typically looking for candidates who have moved through several positions of administration, including principal positions and central office experience. This has led to a pool of 50 to 55 year old women looking for their first superintendencies. However, boards often do not want to hire superintendents nearing retirement age (Tallerico, 2000).

Glass (2000) found similar results when examining the data from the 2000 American Association of School Administrators' survey. Findings indicate that women are poorly positioned for superintendencies, lack appropriate credentials, have little fiscal management experience, eschew pursuit of superintendencies for personal reasons, face boards' reluctance to hire them, have stronger motivations to remain in teaching, and enter the administrator preparation pipeline too late. Only 294 women accounted for 13.2% of the 2,232 superintendents responding to the national survey in 2000.

Although these barriers exist, there have been other studies that address successful strategies and promising careers for women aspiring to the superintendency (Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996). Attaining the executive leadership position has led to fulfilling purposeful careers for many. Personal accounts of women attaining the position have created optimism for other women who aspire to the superintendency. Through sponsorships, supportive families, and resilience, a body of women has made it to the top and continues to thrive in the superintendency. Other successful strategies cited by Grogan & Brunner (2005) have included developing strong interpersonal skills, organizational relationships, expert knowledge about instructional issues, and the ability to balance family and professional obligations.

### *Problem Statement*

Women overwhelmingly dominate the ranks of teaching, yet men continue to dominate the most senior executive leadership position in public schools, that of superintendent. Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) found that 13.2% of American school superintendents were women and 86.6% were men. The superintendency has been categorized as being “the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States” (Björk, 2000, p. 8); however, in 2003, the level of women school superintendents was at an all time high of 18% (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

North Carolina is only slightly different. Of the 117 superintendencies in the state including two federal districts, women currently occupy 18 of these executive leadership positions, slightly more than 15% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010). But most interesting to note, women far outnumber men in all areas of instructional personnel in North Carolina; 94,083 to 24,422. Women teachers outnumber men teachers by almost four to one: 78,112 to 19,564.

Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the Office for Civil Rights has prohibited discrimination based on gender (Title VII, Section 86.51, OCR, US Department of Health and Human Services) since 1964, a severe gender gap continues to exist in the public school superintendency in the nation and in North Carolina. This research sought to identify perceived barriers that may account for the discrepancy. However, since there were a number of instances where women attained these senior-level executive positions, this study also explored successful strategies women used in attaining the executive leadership position and how they exhibited resilience and perseverance in confronting adversity along the way. To address this problem, the following research questions were formulated.

### *Research Questions*

This study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about barriers women may encounter in their pursuit of the public school superintendency in North Carolina?
2. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about effective strategies women may use in attaining the public school superintendency in North Carolina?
3. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about resilience and perseverance skills women may use to overcome adversity in attaining and sustaining the superintendency?
4. What are the career paths of women superintendents in North Carolina?

### *Overview of Methodology*

This study consisted of a descriptive non-experimental research design where data were collected from surveys, resumes, and vitas, as well as from follow-up interviews. The data identified perceived barriers women school superintendents encountered as well as successful strategies they employed to navigate the barriers. Data were also collected regarding how women school superintendents exhibited resiliency through thinking, capacity building, and action skills as well as perseverance skills as they aspired to and succeeded in attaining the superintendency. Biographic and demographic data were collected to create a current profile of North Carolina women school superintendents. In addition, data regarding career pathways were collected from professional resumes and vitas of the participants.

The sample included current women school superintendents in North Carolina along with former women superintendents. Former women superintendents for the purposes of this study were limited to those who no longer held the superintendent position yet had held the

position within the last five years prior to 2010. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the chi-square goodness of fit test. Interview data were analyzed using coding and chunking procedures to find patterns, relationships, and existing themes within the data to make meaning of the participants' experiences.

### *Significance of the Study*

There exists a need to determine why women leaders are not being fully utilized in the public school superintendency in North Carolina. Although talent and potential exist among the teaching ranks, of which the majority is women, this pool of talent is not equally tapped in seeking senior-level executive leaders of school districts. Education deserves the benefit of the diverse perspectives and experiences that different kinds of educators can bring to executive leadership (Brunner, 2002). Furthermore, equal opportunity in employment is encouraged by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although this Act provides a safety net, it is not a mandate to provide everyone an equal opportunity to career positions regardless of race, color, religion, gender or national origin. Finally, it is morally objectionable to ignore inequities in the attainments of men and women to specific occupations and positions (Tallerico, 2000).

This study may be beneficial to women educators aspiring to the superintendency. The shared experiences of current women school superintendents in North Carolina will provide information regarding the barriers that exist, means to overcome those barriers, and specific strategies for building resilience and perseverance skills for successful attainment of the position. Knowing the skills and strategies necessary for success for women aspiring to the superintendency may be beneficial for universities and professional organizations who are preparing women to assume the role of the highest position in education. This study may also serve as a resource guide for those in positions of hiring superintendents (school boards

and other gatekeepers) to ensure a conscious awareness of perceived discriminatory practices. This awareness may lead to equal access for women and provide them with a greater opportunity for acquiring the executive leadership position (Tallerico, 2000). The superintendency is an important leadership position for America's schools. The search for and selection of superintendents are among the most significant responsibilities of school boards (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996; Tallerico, 2000). Providing fair and open access to potential candidates of quality is an important part of exercising this responsibility.

Finally, for educational research to be useful and inclusive, documented experiences of all participants need to be taken into account (Brunner, 1999). The field of educational research historically has not seen the world from a gender-inclusive perspective and therefore presents only a partial picture (Björk, 2000; Blount & Tallerico, 2004; Grogan, 2002). In order for the picture to be complete, experiences from women need to be investigated and documented in comprehensive ways. This study will contribute to addressing the gap in our knowledge of women school superintendents and the barriers they face as well as the successful strategies they employ to overcome them while increasing capacity for resilience and perseverance.

#### *Definition of Key Terms*

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions applied.

*Barrier:* Any factor or obstacle that hinders career advancement to the next level in administration or management (Shakeshaft, 1998).

*Executive Leader:* Superintendent (Shakeshaft, 1998).

*Gate Keeper:* School boards or professional search firms hired by school boards to search and recruit candidates for the superintendency (Chase & Bell, 1990).

*Glass Ceiling:* An unacknowledged discriminatory barrier that prevents women and people of color from rising to positions of power or responsibility, as within a corporation (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

*Good Old Boy Network:* An informal system of networking between men whereby they help each other get to the top of an organization (Hudson, 1993).

*Labyrinth:* A metaphor representing the complex and circuitous paths to executive leadership women may encounter (Eagly & Carli, 2009).

*Perception:* The impressions and feelings of the participant that become part of the data to be used in attempting to understand a setting (Patton, 2002).

*Perseverance:* Grit; passion for attaining long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

*Resilience:* The human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity (Grotberg, 1997).

*Sponsor:* A mentor, teacher, or coach whose functions are to make introductions or to train a person to move effectively through the system; to promote that person for promising opportunities within the organizational structure (Kanter, 1976).

*Superintendent:* The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Executive Leader of the school district hired by the school board to manage the administrative affairs of the school district (Norton et al., 1996).

*Women's Ways of Knowing:* The manner in which women interpret and give meaning to their experiences and the world around them based on an ethic of care, responsibility, and connectedness.

### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter provided the introduction to the study. The problem statement, the research questions, an overview of the methodology, and the significance of the study were discussed here. Introduction of key terms along with their definitions were incorporated in this introductory chapter to assist the reader. A review of the literature relating to women in the superintendency is presented in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE

The review of the literature included an historical perspective of women's efforts to achieve gender equity in the public school superintendency. In addition, the literature surrounding barriers, successful strategies for overcoming barriers, and the career pathways of women aspiring to and attaining the superintendency was reviewed. A review of the literature on resiliency in the superintendency and perseverance was included. Finally, this chapter provides the rationale for the methodology to collect the data by revealing the conceptual framework upon which this research was based.

### *Historical Perspective*

In 1910, approximately 9% of school superintendents were women. After women won the right to vote in 1920, feminist groups started promoting equality for women. Hence, the number of female superintendents increased to 11% in 1930 (Blount, 1998). Due to this growth, the years of 1900 through 1930 have been viewed as a "golden age" for women in school administration (Hansot & Tyack, 1981). Yet, these statistics can be misleading. Even during this period, women achieved only modest success by arriving "in numbers in the lower strata of the upper crust" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p.34). During this time, women occupied elementary principalships and county or state superintendencies. Unlike the higher status and higher paying secondary principalships and district superintendencies held by men, elementary principalships and county and state superintendencies were low-paying, low-status, low power positions. Furthermore, "Like their teacher counterparts, women

administrators sometimes attained their positions by default - either because no men were available or because women were a bargain as they were paid less than men” (Shakeshaft, 1989, p.38). For instance, a 1905 study of 467 city school systems found that the average male elementary principal was paid \$1,542 annually whereas the average female elementary principal earned \$970, 63% of what the male earned (NEA, 1905). Even by the 1920s, women still earned significantly less, just three-quarters of what men earned for the same work (Lathrop, 1922).

After this initial period of growth, women in the superintendency declined to 9% in 1950. As the position of superintendent became more professionalized, numbers of women further declined to 1.3% in 1971 and to an all-time low in 1982 when women occupied only 1.2% of all superintendent positions (Blount, 1998). The percentage of women superintendents remained less than 10% until the 1990s when it doubled from 6.6% to 13.2% (Björk, 2000). Even after a century, the percentage of women in superintendent positions remained virtually unchanged.

Shakeshaft (1989) in her synthesis of research on women in educational administration up to 1985 identified several factors that accounted for the decline of women in executive school leadership positions from the 1950s throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After World War II, fewer women were trained as educators, and males appeared in surplus. During World War II, women were welcomed into schools as teachers and administrators because men were serving in the armed forces. However, the opportunities were brief. Men who had served their country in the war were rewarded with the G.I. Bill (formally known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944), which provided funds for educations that trained them to be teachers and administrators, among

other professions. Women who had served their country during the war by leading schools while the men were away were rewarded with dismissals from their positions once the men returned (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Furthermore, in some locations across the country, prohibitions against married female teachers and female administrators were reinstated due to the argument that men needed the positions to support their families (Blount, 1998). Moves surfaced to consolidate small school systems into large ones. This practice almost always resulted in women administrators from small districts losing their positions to men in the new structure. Finally, women were not encouraged to enter teaching and administration but were encouraged to remain in the home to perform the gender-defined duties of motherhood and wifehood (Shakeshaft, 1989).

#### *Women School Superintendents Today*

To gather the most up-to-date, comprehensive information on women and the superintendency, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) commissioned a 2003 nationwide study of women in the superintendency and women in central office positions. Using the AASA membership database and data from Market Data Retrieval, 2,500 women superintendents were identified and mailed surveys. An additional 3,000 surveys were sent to women holding central office positions of assistant superintendent or higher. Responses came from 472 central office personnel and 723 superintendents, nearly 30% of the total population of women superintendents (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Grogan and Brunner (2005) compared the results from the 2003 AASA survey to the results of the 2000 AASA Study of the superintendency (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). Similarities as well as differences surfaced between men and women superintendents. Both

men and women superintendents were about the same age; 70% in both studies were 55 or younger. The proportion of women and men who served in large, medium, and small districts was roughly the same. However, it was interesting to note that 72% of men served in districts enrolling fewer than 3,000 students compared to 60% of women.

The job search for both genders was similar: 73% of women and 72% of men secured their jobs within a year of beginning the job search. Like the majority of men surveyed, for 50% of the women the career path to the superintendency included teaching, a principalship, and a central office position. However, some women took less traditional paths by eluding the principalship or the central office position. Men did not (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

The survey also identified that women aspired to the superintendency, and they worked hard to fulfill their aspirations. Women led 18% of the 13,728 districts nationwide in 2003. In this survey, 40% of the women in central office administration identified themselves as aspiring to the position. Toward that end, 74% had either earned their superintendent credential or were working toward certification (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Differences among men and women superintendents were more pronounced when considering preparation for the position. Significantly more women superintendents than men held undergraduate degrees in education: 58% of women compared to 24% of men. Women also spent several more years in the classroom before moving into administration than men. Nearly 40% of men have five or fewer years of experience in the classroom. Women's academic preparation for the position was more current than that of men: 47% of women earned their highest degree within the past 10 years prior to 2003 compared to 36% of men. More than 40% of men earned their highest degree 15 or more years ago (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

The 2003 survey also revealed that 35% of the women superintendents had raised children under the age of 20 while they were in the position (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). However, 13% of the women's marriages ended in divorce due to what they perceived to be demands of the position. On average, women who responded to the survey had been superintendents for six years, whether in their first or subsequent positions. Based on the 2000 survey, the average number of years for men was nine (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

On the whole, both men and women liked being superintendents, and the majority said if they were to do it over again, they would want to be superintendents. More women than men (74% compared to 67%) said they would choose the same profession, and significantly more women superintendents than men (74% compared to 56%) described their jobs as self-fulfilling. Grogan and Brunner (2005) state that this may be comforting news for those women who aspire to the position because despite the tolls such stressful positions take on the individual, there may be important professional and personal gains.

Although the percentage of women attaining the superintendency is growing, men superintendents still far outnumber women superintendents. Women led only 18% of the 13,728 districts nationwide in 2003 (Grogan & Brunner, 2005) even though they made up 51% of the national population and 80% of the teaching pool where future superintendents originate.

### *Women's Ways of Knowing and Leading*

As women increasingly aspire to and enter into executive leadership roles that have traditionally been occupied by men, debate over differences and similarities among the genders continues. Although the literature (Glass, et.al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005) regarding female leaders in education revealed that more women were entering

administrative roles, “There is still much we do not know about sex discrimination, about female career patterns, about women leaders, and about inclusive conceptualizations of managerial and administrative theory” (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995, p.xi).

Women often differed from male administrators by leading differently. Grogan (1996) conducted a study in a northwestern state of the United States of 27 self-identified, women aspirants to the superintendency. One of the major findings of her research confirmed some alternative approaches to leadership that feminist inquiry suggests are part of women’s and other nontraditional leaders’ ways. She found the participants to highly value their activities of care and emotional connection with the members of the organization. They saw themselves as leading through others by allowing others to own their own ideas and to participate in shared decision making. Grogan (1996) also found the participants used reflective styles of administration. This reflective style provided the female superintendents with feedback and insight into their effectiveness. They valued their experiences as opportunities for growth and tended to view their decisions in context. Grogan (1996) found that above all, for the most part the women leaders shared a fundamental concern for the welfare of all children. This concern not only drove the women in the study into educational administration but kept them there as well.

Edson (1988) also documented that women who entered the field of educational leadership tended to do so because they wished to meet the challenges inherent in leadership roles but more importantly, they believed they could provide students with more positive educational experiences than they were previously provided. Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) found women leaders employed transformational leadership through webs of inclusion and nurturing. Funk (1998) found women leaders to use interactive leadership styles where they

tended to exhibit empathy, sensitivity, care, support, compassion, patience, organization, and attention to detail.

Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) examined what men and women said about themselves as educational leaders. They concluded that one may easily think that the two work at different occupations in dissimilar settings. Men did not perceive barriers to leadership opportunities nor did they necessarily perceive differences in leadership behaviors of the two genders. However, the women educational leaders overwhelmingly perceived barriers and reported that they did in fact believe that women lead in ways that are different from men. Previously, Shakeshaft (1989) argued that subtle contrasts in behavior and more importantly, in motivation towards specific tasks by men and women leaders, were indeed present and at times, were dramatic in scope and consequence.

Shakeshaft (1989) in her review of the literature reported that the research supporting “no differences” in ways of leading was limited in several ways. What was not investigated in these studies, what was not even conceptualized, were the activities that women undertook that were in addition to and different from those that men performed and their motivation for undertaking those activities. She found that the studies only viewed women within a male framework and from a theoretical background formulated on male behavior and understanding. In rare instances where women were taken into consideration, the literature looked at ways men led and then asked if women did the same things. Understandably, for the most part, women’s duties were very similar to men’s duties. Therefore, a justifiable conclusion would have been that women did most of the same things that men did when they managed and led in educational settings. Unfortunately, some researchers did not stop at that conclusion. They went on to generalize that because this was so, there were in fact, no

observable gender differences in leadership between women and men. On the contrary, other researchers (Gilligan, 1982; Grogan, 1996; Helgesen, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989) have identified specific gender differences in the areas of work environment, leadership style, communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, and the use of power.

It is important to recognize and accept the differences revealed in women's ways of knowing – understanding and interpreting the world around them - and leading because the effectiveness of women leaders may depend upon this altered approach. Discrimination and exclusion may have shaped the conventional view of leaders' work because women's experiences and behaviors were often unlike those of men. But to insure a broader and more comprehensive picture and to possibly even re-conceptualize the superintendency, experiences of women leaders need to be taken into account (Grogan, 1996).

#### *Barriers to Success*

An historical review of women in school administration documents that women have been consigned to teaching while men have been and still are clustered in administration (Shakeshaft, 1998). Historical records show that women have consistently been considered second choice in the selection of superintendents, and that the barriers or constraints women face today differ little from those that prevented women from attaining the superintendency in earlier times (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).

Although many of the barriers that prevent women from entering top leadership positions have been identified and investigated, few researchers have examined in extensive detail the root causes of these blockages. However, a few models attempting to offer explanations as to how these barriers originated have been suggested.



According to Estler (1975), some of the models were: the Woman's Place Model, which assumed women's nonparticipation in administrative careers were based solely on social norms; the Discrimination Model, which drew on the assumption that institutional patterns were a result of the efforts of one group to exclude participation of another; and the Meritocracy Model, which assumed that the most competent people were promoted, thus women were not competent. Estler found that the Meritocracy Model did not fit reality, but the Women's Place Model and the Discrimination Model had evidence that supported their propositions.

Adkison (1981) in her review of the research used competing explanations to account for women's lack of success in entering administration by illustrating that "the same data can be explained equally well by different concepts" (p. 330). She analyzed women's career barriers from sex-role stereotyping, sex-role socialization, career socialization, organizational characteristics, and devaluation of women's perspectives.

Shakeshaft (1989) in her synthesis of research provided another framework for examining barriers by placing them within the domains of internal and external barriers, all originating from an androcentric view in society. Internal barriers were those historical and societal assumptions that pressured women to conform to roles and behaviors traditionally associated with women. Many viewed these barriers as constraints that women could overcome. External barriers were those societal stereotypes and organizational structures that perpetuated discrimination against women. Barriers of this type required social and organizational change. By viewing internal and external barriers as results of an androcentric view of society, Shakeshaft suggested that all constraints on women seeking the

superintendency originated from societal forces on women to function as inferior to men and to view the world from a male perspective.

Hansot and Tyack (1981) in their review of research from 1974-1981 provided an explanatory model that focused on the individual woman as possessing internal barriers that kept her from advancing. Socialization and gender stereotyping, which were preconceived social constructs identifying what women and men were like and how they should behave, were seen as the guiding forces behind all women's behavior. This perspective essentially blamed the woman for her lack of achievement in school leadership. To remedy the situation, women needed to be re-socialized so that they would fit into the male world. Moreover, women had to do this "man's job" better than a man to get even a modicum of professional respect and recognition. Schmuck (1979) described these internal barriers as lack of confidence or low self-image and lack of motivation or aspiration.

Although it was true that women were shown to have lower self-confidence than did men in public sphere activities, studies of self-confidence often were confined to just that – public sphere activities (Schmuck, 1980). Few measures were taken to study women's self-confidence from a woman's perspective instead of the traditionally male-defined view of confidence being associated with public activities (Shakeshaft, 1989). Thus it was unclear whether women had less self-confidence or if they only had less self-confidence in areas in which they had not traditionally been exposed and been given a chance to excel. Shakeshaft argued that any human will have lower self-confidence in areas where he or she is not experienced than would an individual who has experience. Therefore, low self-confidence might be viewed as a product of a system that keeps women separated from experiences that would help build their confidence in the public sphere.

Furthermore, what has often been seen as a personal failing of women – lack of confidence – might be more accurately seen as a consequence of a gendered-structured society where men and women are socialized into accepting and adopting stereotypes. Chick, Heilman-Houser, and Hunter (2002) identified such behavior through observation and analysis with childcare center staff and students. Such stratification, dividing and organizing into classes, generated a belief in females that they lack ability. This belief perpetuated circumstances that prevented girls from being able to develop self-confidence in the public arena by preventing them from receiving opportunities or positive feedback. Although low self-esteem and confidence may be viewed as internal barriers that women can overcome on their own (Andrews, 1984), these barriers may actually be external in nature due to the fact that they can be traced back to conditions such as socialization created by a male-dominated society that has limited women’s traditional experiences (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Lack of aspiration is viewed as yet another restriction preventing women from attaining the superintendency. However, the problem may actually lie in the way the term, *aspiration* – moving up the hierarchy – has been defined by male experience (Reynolds & Elliott, 1980). For many women, their aspirations included teaching, and they were achieving that for which they were aiming. Therefore, perhaps a better way to understand women’s perceived failure to aspire to higher levels of school leadership was to actually rethink the achievement norm inherent in the belief that positions of administration were higher or more powerful positions than positions in the classroom. Since men have traditionally occupied the highest level in the hierarchy and received more pay for that position than women, these

leadership roles have been seen as positions of dominance, in particularly male dominance (the leaders) over females (the teachers).

Another explanation for the seeming lack of aspiration of women in education was that they often did not verbalize their desires for fear of reprisals. Ortiz (1982) found by interviewing 55 Mexican-American teachers that women teachers who expressed interest in administration prior to receiving tenure often had difficulty getting tenure. Thus acknowledging aspiration may be a detrimental thing for women and might be a reason some prefer not to identify their aspirations for administrative positions publicly.

Using only internal barriers as an explanation for women's perceived lack of achievement seemed inadequate because these barriers were seldom more prevalent for women than for men. When they were prevalent, it may not be women's weaknesses and inadequacies that were to be blamed but rather the male-defined organizational structure of schooling that was the root cause of these inequities (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Kanter (1976) stated "opportunity structures shape behavior in such a way that they confirm their own prophecies" (p.158). Thus people, who had very little opportunity to move up the hierarchy such as women teachers, tended to disengage in the form of depressed or invisible aspirations. Male teachers in contrast who were highly mobile within the hierarchy "tended to develop attitudes and values that impelled them further along the track: work commitment, high aspirations, and upward orientations" (p.158). Therefore women's apparent lack of aspiration in administration might more accurately be seen as the expected response to lack of opportunity.

Hansot and Tyack's (1981) approach described how organizational structure shapes the behavior of its members; "The chief source of male hegemony lies not in the psychological

makeup of individuals...but in the structure and operation of organizations. Women behave in self-limiting ways not because they were socialized as females but because they are locked into low-power, low-visibility, dead-end jobs” (p.7). Another model discussed by Hansot and Tyack portrayed a world that was male defined and male run. According to Hansot and Tyack’s explanation, it was male dominance in the bureaucracy of schooling that led to conditions that kept women from advancing into positions of power and prestige thereby imposing limits upon women in school leadership.

A world in which men occupy the positions that command the most prestige is well documented throughout the literature of all natures: anthropological, psychological, sociological, biological, and political (Hawley, Little, & Card, 2008; Neff, Cooper, & Woodruff, 2007). Gender division occurs in all societies and results in a gender-based division of labor. Shakeshaft stated that “although the specific tasks may differ by gender from society to society, two things do not change: Men and women divide the labor on the basis of sex, and male tasks are more valued than female ones” (1989, p.94-95). In addition, this highly valued world is not friendly to women because men do “manly” things that women are perceived to be too weak to do. Male dominance may explain much of the source of inequality in educational leadership because it is deeply imbedded in the social institution of public education and in individuals.

Blount and Tallerico (2004) in their examination of 20<sup>th</sup> century longitudinal data on the American superintendency’s composition by gender made the distinction between men’s and women’s work even clearer. Although the essence of the distinction was that there were two kinds of work – men’s and women’s - the division took a variety of forms. One form reflected a separation into private and public spheres, with women predominating in

household environments and domestic roles, and men predominating in work outside the home. A second form was where either one or the other sex made up virtually the entire population of paid employees in a particular industry or profession: for example, males in construction or mining, females in textile sewing or preschool teaching. Yet a third form manifested itself as stratification by gender within the same work setting. In hospitals, for example, nurses and clerical workers were overwhelmingly female, whereas doctors and hospital administrators were predominately male. Similarly, in PreK-12 American schooling, males dominated administrative leadership roles overall, whereas females far outnumbered males in teaching. Therefore, the make-up of the organization of education itself may be historically seen as a deterring factor for women trying to gain access to the superintendency (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Another barrier cited in the literature was the lack of role models for women (Brunner, 1999; Johnson, 2010). Women aspirants to the superintendency seldom saw other women in executive leadership positions. This lack of opportunity to see other women in leadership roles, to hear how these women described their lives, and to compare themselves with women just one step farther up the hierarchy were cited as reasons women did not move into administrative positions in larger numbers. The importance of role models in helping both the women themselves and others within the system to view women administrators as a normal occurrence, rather than an exceptional one, could not be overstated. Women needed to see what feminine leadership looked like. They needed opportunities to talk about the unique issues females faced, and they needed examples of resiliency.

Unlike role models, who generally were of the same sex and race in order for women to identify with the model, sponsors or mentors were either male or female. A sponsor or a mentor was much more important to the individual woman than was a role model because it was the sponsor who advised the woman, supported her for jobs, and promoted and guided her. Although most women did not have sponsors or mentors, the women who were successful in acquiring leadership positions had sponsors or mentors. This sponsorship or mentoring appeared to be an important process in a woman's administrative career.

Women needed to have access to a network that provided them with information on job openings and administrative strategies as well as one that increased their visibility and group support. Unfortunately, women were traditionally excluded from these "good old boy" networks and thus did not hear about administrative positions, were not known by others, and had few people to approach for counsel (Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2000). Organizations or caucuses geared towards female member participation were supportive network structures. In addition, Grogan and Brunner (2005) found that powerful groups and organizations with both men and women members were superior networks where aspiring women found sponsors through a network of both sexes.

Gatekeepers such as school boards and the consultants they hired to run superintendent searches also have played key roles in determining access to the superintendency. Marietti and Stout (1994) collected data from 114 school board presidents in nineteen Western states. They found that higher proportions of female-majority boards hired female superintendents than did male-majority boards. They also found that, compared to boards that hire males, boards that hired females were more likely to govern in K-8 districts, had high numbers of women in administrative positions, and had a great number of higher social status members

as reflected in higher levels of education and household income. Grogan and Henry (1995) also examined the relationship between school boards and superintendent candidates. They found that the superintendency continued to be constructed as a male arena with emphasis placed on prior experience: with budget and finance, with discipline and control, in a sizable district, and with advocacy by powerful others. They concluded that “warrior, military, or business mentality” (p. 172) predominated in conceptions of the superintendency. These androcentric perceptions disadvantaged women candidates who tended to come from backgrounds and life experiences more characterized by community, caring, and nurturance.

Chase and Bell (1990) investigated how 50 gatekeepers (44 board members and six search consultants) talked about hiring, working with, and observing women school superintendents. They found considerable diversity in that discourse. Some gatekeepers’ dialogue focused on the problematic features of the context within which women superintendents worked. Some examples included the norms that constrained females as well as collective rather than individual responsibility for contributing to or eliminating obstacles that women confronted. Furthermore, gatekeepers’ talk frequently focused instead on “individual achievement and gender neutrality” (Chase & Bell, 1990, p.163). This focus shifted attention away from the problematic social and organizational environment, emphasized the women superintendent’s individual responsibility for overcoming barriers, and obscured the relation of those obstacles to a system of structures and ideologies. The research suggested subtle forms of sex discrimination by showing how school board members and superintendent search consultants “may be helpful to individual women and at the same time participate in processes that reproduce men’s dominance” (Chase & Bell, 1990, p.174).



Family and home responsibilities, including the major responsibility for child and home care have been listed as barriers to women's achievement in administration in a number of studies (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 1996; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989). As a result, many women in administration either never married or were divorced or widowed. Many of these women found the demands of marriage and work incompatible.

For women who had children, the tug of war between career and family was frequently too costly (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Women found themselves on a career trajectory from teacher leader to principal to superintendent. But when met with the ultimate decision to pursue the superintendency, they faced a choice they had not anticipated – choosing between career aspirations and family responsibility. Because many women placed self-imposed barriers of choosing family over career, few women with young children entered the superintendency during the prime of their career. After the children were grown, middle age and lack of central office administrative experience caused possibilities to diminish.

Research does not support the notion that women's work suffers from added responsibilities to care for a family, yet men in positions of power believed that family responsibilities adversely affected job performance. For example, the 2000 American Association of School Administrators Survey of superintendents and school board presidents reported that 78% of males believed that women, more than men, put family ahead of jobs. In addition, women were believed to take more time off for personal reasons, primarily for children, than did men, and that pregnancy and administrative careers did not mix (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). Shakeshaft (1989) reported that home and family responsibilities

often provided obstacles for women in leadership positions in two ways: “The woman not only must effectively juggle all of her tasks, she must also contend with the bulk of male school board presidents and superintendents who erroneously believe that not only is she unable to manage the balancing act but that it is inappropriate for her to even attempt it” (Shakeshaft, 1989, p.113).

Although the barriers have remained the same as documented consistently throughout the literature, Derrington and Sharratt (2009) discovered that the importance women placed on those barriers changed. In 1993, they conducted a study of 200 Washington State women superintendents and other women administrators who aspired to the position as identified by the Washington Association of School Administrators professional job listing service. The study consisted of a questionnaire based upon Shakeshaft’s previous studies on barriers to the superintendency (1985, 1989). From this initial research, Derrington and Sharratt identified the top three barriers as sex role stereotyping, sex discrimination, and the lack of role models/mentors to guide women into the superintendency. In 2007, the researchers sent the same questionnaire to 140 women subscribing to the Washington Association of School Administrators professional job listing service. They found that the same barriers were still present for women; however, the importance of those barriers had changed. The top three barriers by importance in 2007 were: self-imposed barriers; “good old boys network” helping men not women; and, school boards not well informed regarding the qualifications of women superintendent candidates. Survey comments revealed that women defined “self-imposed” barriers as issues relating to family responsibilities and the inability to relocate family.

Derrington and Sharratt’s findings (2009) were consistent with findings from other researchers across the country who undertook the challenge of identifying perceived barriers

for women aspiring to the chief executive position. During 2003-2007, 29 completed doctoral dissertation studies as identified through Dissertation Abstracts' database, investigated barriers. State studies included California (Wickham, 2008), Illinois, Indiana, and Texas (Sharp, Malone, & Walter, & Supley, 2000), Oregon (Parent, 2004), Chicago, Illinois, both city and suburban areas (Loder, 2005), and Iowa (Olsen, 2005). Lastly, the most prolific researchers on women who aspire to and attain the superintendency, Grogan, Brunner, and Shakeshaft, have studied and discussed women's perceptions on barriers for over two decades. Therefore, it is unquestionable that women aspiring to the superintendency encounter constraints. However, some women have utilized successful strategies to overcome barriers in order to become successful superintendents.

#### *Strategies for Success*

Hill and Ragland (1995) postulated that mentoring increased a woman's career opportunities and development of political savvy. Their study included interviews of 37 women educational leaders. Mentoring was found to be lacking for women educators for the following reasons: (a) Male mentors did not consider that some women would be interested in leading. (b) Cross-gender mentoring could be potentially construed as something more than peer support. (c) Many women in influential positions lacked understanding of the power and processes of mentoring behavior. These researchers found that some women did not have time to recognize the value of the mentoring role in the scope of their careers. It was concluded that women must search for mentors and use them in positive ways to advance their careers.

Grogan (1996) in her study of 27 aspirants to the superintendency identified further strategies for success. Candidates were initially expected to be prepared for the position in

two different ways: (1) to have a high level of formal training, including at least eligibility for, if not completion of, state superintendent certification and a university degree beyond the bachelor's, and (2) to have credible prior experience on the job as an administrator capable of handling a superintendency, if not actual experience as a superintendent. Additionally, there was a strong opinion expressed by the women aspirants in Grogan's study that an aspirant needed sponsors and a certain amount of visibility that comes with university connections and/or participation in professional organizations.

Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) identified factors for advancing career opportunities for women as cited in The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency. They were:

1. Emphasis placed on improving instruction
2. Knowledge of the instructional process
3. Knowledge of curriculum
4. Ability to maintain organizational relationships
5. Interpersonal skills
6. Responsiveness to parents and community groups

In this survey, 83.3% of women and 61.7% of men agreed that women's interpersonal skills were the most influential factor for advancing career opportunities for women; in addition, over 75% of the women believed that their ability to maintain organizational relationships and their responsiveness to the community were also important factors that advanced their careers.

Grogan and Brunner (2005) stated that the participants from the 2003 Study of Women Superintendents reported that their boards hired them to be educational leaders rather than managers. Therefore, knowledge of curriculum and the instructional process was

paramount. Grogan and Brunner believed that as more school boards valued administrators as instructional leaders, women would become more attractive candidates for the superintendent position.

Brunner (1998) created the framework “Strategies for Success” as a result of her qualitative study on the insights of 12 women superintendents and 24 people who knew them. She suggested that there was a need to identify strategies for success specifically for women superintendents. Success, for the purposes of the study, was defined as being not only capable and effective in the role, but also well-liked and supported by others who knew or worked for the superintendent. Using qualitative methods aimed at understanding narrative data, the study yielded seven significant findings, in seven “strategies for success” found in the practice of women superintendents. While the findings were sound advice for anyone wishing to succeed in an administrative position, each one was specifically related to gender as an issue associated with the position of superintendent of schools. The seven strategies for success were drawn from the work the women superintendents in the study had done to manage the complex expectations confronting women in the superintendency (Brunner, 1998, p. 31).

The seven strategies arrived at in the study were stated as follows:

1. Women superintendents need to learn to balance role-related expectations with gender-related ones.
2. Women superintendents need to keep their agendas simple in order to focus on their primary purpose: the care of children, including strict attention to academic achievement.
3. Women superintendents need to develop the ability to be “culturally bilingual.”

4. Women superintendents need to “act like a woman.”
5. Women superintendents need to remove or let go of anything that blocks their success.
6. Women superintendents need to be fearless, courageous, “can do” risk takers. At the same time, they need to have a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible.
7. Women superintendents need to share power and credit.

Brunner (1998) concluded “that although on the surface women in the superintendency did not appear to be paying attention to the fact that they are women, the study found the reverse. The women in the study articulated and carried out gender-specific strategies which created, in part, their support while in the superintendency” (p. 31). Her findings agreed with the assertions of Chase (1995) who found that “women superintendents” fully acknowledge their continuous subjection to gendered and racial inequalities in the profession (p. xi).

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) offered the following strategies in response to their investigation of 140 women aspirants to the superintendency in the state of Washington: cultivate resolve and an iron will; balance your personal and your professional life; negotiate boundaries and seek creative alternatives; and decide on ways to lighten the “double day” work load between work and home. Each of these strategies was offered as a possible solution to overcome self-imposed barriers women encountered.

#### *Career Paths*

Many studies concerned with the topic of the superintendency have produced findings related to leadership characteristics and job requirements rather than career pathways,

mobility, or how to access the superintendency (Grogan, 1996). In particular, women's career development when moving toward the superintendency has been ignored except in rare instances (Ortiz, 1982; Tallerico, 2000). Career mobility for women in educational administration has been quite different from that of men who have become superintendents (Björk, 2000; Glass, 2000; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarrel, 2009).

Kim and Brunner (2009) investigated the similarities and differences between women's and men's career mobility toward the superintendency in terms of career pathways and movement patterns with specific attention to women's career pathways as they corresponded with their aspiration to the superintendency. The study was grounded in secondary analyses of two large national data sets: the latest American Association of School Administrators (AASA) ten-year study (Glass et al., 2000), and a second AASA national study of women superintendents and central office administrators (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). One of their major findings confirmed that career pathways for women in educational administration are different than those of men who typically become superintendents. While many men administrators had worked in secondary positions and moved vertically up to the superintendency, women generally traveled to the superintendency through elementary positions and staff roles. Their career mobility patterns were more often horizontal and/or diagonal. In addition, significant differences were found between the career patterns of aspiring and non-aspiring women central office administrators.

Kim and Brunner (2009) reported that the typical route for men to the superintendency was: secondary teacher, athletic coach, assistant secondary principal, secondary principal, and superintendent. The two career paths that were traveled by the greatest percentages of men superintendents were: teacher, principal, central office, and

superintendent (49%); and teacher, principal, and superintendent (33%). More than 80% of men had taught in secondary schools, and 63% of them had the experience of athletic coaching duties in secondary schools. The position of assistant secondary principal and elementary principal were the primary entrances into administrative experience for men; 38% worked as assistant secondary principals and 37% had elementary principalship experiences. For the next career step, most men moved into the secondary principalship (65%) rather than coordinator or directorship in the central office (28.7%). Furthermore, given the comparatively smaller percentage (34%) of men who have assistant/associate/deputy superintendent experience, this study suggests that many men administrators moved directly into the superintendency from the secondary principalship without the stepping-stone of central office administration. The average age of men superintendents was between 52 and 53, and they usually taught in a classroom for 7.3 years. They began their administrative careers around the age of 31.4. Compared to the three women's groups in the study, men's administrative career mobility was faster than that of women administrators by five or six years. Finally, based on the percentages and age/years of educational experience, this study found that men typically took positions throughout their career development process that moved them up vertically – straight into the superintendency.

Kim and Brunner (2009) found for women superintendents, the typical pathway was: elementary or secondary teacher, club advisor, elementary principal, director/coordinator, assistant/associate superintendent, superintendent. The three career paths that were traveled by the greatest percentages of women superintendents were:

- (1) Teacher, principal, central office, superintendent (50%)
- (2) Teacher, central office, superintendent (17%)



(3) Teacher, principal, superintendent (16.3%)

In many cases, secondary school teaching was not the first educational position for women, yet many current women superintendents had experience in teaching in secondary schools (65.3%). While most women teachers were in elementary schools, the majority (63%) of current women superintendents had experience in secondary schools or both elementary and secondary schools. In contrast to men's typical career pathways, the role of athletic coach was not a part of the women's typical career pathways as only 14% of them had filled this position (Kim & Brunner, 2009).

The major entering port into administration for women was the elementary principalship (48.3%). Unlike men, 35% of women superintendents had experience as secondary principals and 57.4% of them had directorship in central office. Another distinguishable difference between men and women superintendents was that while many men moved directly up to the superintendency from secondary principalships, women (56%) normally moved to the top through the position of assistant/associate superintendent. The average age of women superintendents in this study was 53.1, and their average number of years in teaching was 9.8. They began their administrative careers at the average age of 36.7 (around five years older than the men superintendents) and their vertical movement patterns were relatively slow in comparison to men's vertical patterns (Kim & Brunner, 2009).

As Kim and Brunner (2009) revealed, men experienced greater success achieving the superintendency by following a vertical pathway but women most often arrived at the superintendency by following a diagonal and often horizontal path. The researchers note that there is no evidence to suggest that the vertical path produced higher quality superintendents. In fact, they postulate that the more extensive experiences of horizontal promotion, which

presumably provide a broad exposure to administrative experiences, may actually build greater capacity and skills for the superintendency. Furthermore, more extensive experience with curriculum and instruction work may develop superintendents who give greater attention to academic achievement.

### *Capacity for Resiliency*

Knowing that women struggle in their aspirations to obtain the superintendency, it is important to understand what helps them achieve and maintain executive leadership roles. In resiliency studies, some attention has been paid to the superintendency, but little scholarship has regarded women in the executive leadership position (Patterson, 2007). Most of the earlier resiliency works pertain to children (Bushweller, 1995; Henderson, 1998; Luthar & Zelazo, 2003), but more recently, some researchers are studying resiliency as it relates to effective leadership by women (Pankake & Beaty, 2005; Patterson, 2007) .

Christman and McClellan (2008) viewed resiliency as an adaptive and coping trait that formed positive character skills, such as patience, tolerance, responsibility, compassion, determination, and risk taking. Interestingly, the researchers stated that most of these character skills seem to run counter to the socially constructed concept of masculine leadership. As the researchers studied seven diverse women administrators in educational leadership programs who were peer nominated, were accomplished scholars, and who had an average of 11.25 years of experience, they found that the women leaders revealed strong behaviors of resilience. However, their resilient actions could not conclusively be placed in a feminine gender construction model. These women leaders shifted into multidimensional genders and traversed conventional borders.

Resiliency also involves the ability to overcome adversity. Grotberg (2003) expanded this definition to argue that resiliency is transformative – that more than enduring adversity, one changes his or her personality to better persevere through future encounters with hardship. Similar to Grotberg (2003), Reed and Patterson (2007) found that resilient leaders possessed the ability to recover, learn, and in fact, grow stronger when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity. In their study, 15 women superintendents from the state of New York were interviewed to see how they applied strategies to confront adversity and to grow and become more resilient in the process. Their findings revealed five action themes: a) Remain value-driven, not event-driven; b) comprehensively assess past and current reality; c) stay positive about future possibilities; d) maintain a base of caring and support; and e) act on the courage of your convictions.

The shifting definitions of resiliency may be attributed to the studies that have emerged that defined characteristics in participants and resulting frameworks. Wolin and Wolin (1996) developed the challenge model, which describes seven characteristics of resilient people: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. Gupton and Slick (1996) also dubbed persistence, determination, and optimism as resilient characteristics. Reed and Patterson (2007) defined resilience in three skill sets: thinking skills; capacity-building skills; and action skills.

Another study, focusing on resiliency within educators, confronts the debate of whether the characteristic of resilience is something that a person is born with or whether it is a quality of a person's personality that is developed and refined over time. Whatley (1998) interviewed 12 gifted women about their career choices within education and concluded that their "intense self-reflection" enabled the women "to transform pain into growth and achieve

fulfillment in personal and professional domains” (p.4). Whatley stated that self-reflection brought about their ability to overcome adversities. This ability to turn inward for assessment became easier over time with each subsequent barrier that could have slowed them down or permanently removed them from education.

Still other researchers regard resiliency as a developed characteristic. Pankake and Beaty (2005) combined data from two separate studies regarding experiences vital to the success of female educational leaders. A total of 12 women (six superintendents and six high school principals) were involved in personal interviews seeking information about the vital experiences that contributed to their success. The six superintendents were those studied by Pankake, Schroth and Funk (2000). The six high school principals were from a study completed by Beaty (2001). In both studies, particular emphasis was given to information related to overcoming adversity and dealing with mistakes or setbacks they had experienced in their professional and personal lives. The researchers found that the development of resiliency for the women in the study began long before they were in educational leadership positions. Experiences early in their lives appear to have offered them opportunities to deal with adversity and to experience personal growth as a result.

This evidence of overcoming events in their early development and schooling years seems to fit well with the literature on resilient children and how they developed this capacity (Bushweller, 1995; Henderson, 1998; Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Additionally, the experiences of childhood and those represented later in their lives through work liken these women to Bennis’ (1989) “twice-born leaders.” Bennis defined these leaders as those who take the positive and negative circumstances and learning opportunities presented to them and construct a better product.

Twice-borns generally suffer as they grow up, feel different, even isolated, and so develop an elaborate inner life. As they grow older, they become truly independent, relying wholly on their own beliefs and ideas. Leaders who are twice-born are inner directed, self-assured, and as a result, truly charismatic. (p. 49)

Pankake and Beaty (2005) found the women leaders in their study had suffered in their growing years, often feeling different and isolated. Through their stories, they presented themselves as individuals who had strongly developed beliefs and ideas. All were described to be inner directed, self-assured, and to some degree, charismatic. Although adverse situations did not decrease for these women, their understanding of adversity and the capacity for dealing with it increased. These women credited adverse experiences as being vital to their development as leaders and in their development in understanding themselves as women.

### *Capacity for Perseverance*

Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) define grit as perseverance and passion for attaining long-term goals. Perseverance is used interchangeably for grit in this study.

Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon: his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course (p.1087-1088).

Duckworth et al. (2007) found during interviews with professionals in investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law that when asked what quality

distinguishes star performers in their respective fields, these individuals cited grit or a close synonym as often as talent. Those interviewed were awed by the achievements of peers who did not at first seem as gifted as others but whose sustained commitment to their ambitions was exceptional. Likewise, those interviewed noted with surprise that prodigiously gifted peers did not end up in the upper echelons of their field. This observation led the researchers to develop the grit scale and to conduct multiple studies investigating grit or perseverance.

Across six studies, individual differences in grit accounted for significant incremental variance in success outcomes over and beyond that explained by IQ, to which it was not positively related. In Studies 1 and 2, Duckworth et.al (2007) found that grittier individuals had attained higher levels of education than less gritty individuals of the same age. Older individuals tended to be higher in grit than younger individuals, suggesting that the quality of grit, although a stable individual difference, may increase over the life span. In Study 3, undergraduates at an elite university who scored higher in grit also earned higher GPAs than their peers, despite having lower SAT scores. In Studies 4 and 5, grit was a better predictor of first summer retention at West Point Academy than was either self-control or a summary measure of cadet quality used by the West Point admissions committee. In the final study, grittier competitors in the Scripps National Spelling Bee outranked less gritty competitors of the same age. The researchers came to the conclusion that achievement is the product of talent and effort with the latter a function of the intensity, direction, and duration of one's exertions toward a goal. They also found that grit places an emphasis on long-term stamina rather than short-term intensity. Whereas individuals high in need for achievement pursue goals that are neither too easy nor too hard, individuals high in grit deliberately set for themselves extremely long-term objectives and do not swerve from them – even in the

absence of positive feedback and that grit can entail dedication to implicitly or explicitly rewarding goals.

In a qualitative study of the development of 120 world-class pianists, neurologists, swimmers, chess players, mathematicians, and sculptors, Bloom (1985) noted that “only a few were regarded as prodigies by teachers, parents, or experts (p. 533).” Rather, accomplished individuals worked day after day, for at least 10 to 15 years, to reach the top of their fields. Bloom (1985) observed that in every studied field, the general qualities possessed by high achievers included a strong interest in the particular field, a desire to reach “a high level of attainment” in that field, and a “willingness to put in great amounts of time and effort (p. 544).” These insights along with those cited by Duckworth et.al (2007) suggest that, in every field, grit or perseverance may be as essential as talent to high accomplishment.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Women aspiring to the superintendency may face a number of deterrents that men do not encounter. Otherwise, there may possibly be a more gender-equitable distribution of superintendencies (Grogan, 1996). Although research is beginning to explore the situation from women’s perspectives, it is possible that more research may need to be conducted. The absence of women in the executive leadership position suggests that women may be seen through traditional theoretical lenses and may be measured against ideals that have historically served men best. Hence, in the past, the problem may have been seen as women themselves instead of the lens through which they and their work were viewed.

### *The Lens*

This study employed a theoretical lens of women’s ways of knowing and leading. The participants were women. The research focus was about women’s perceptions and career

paths. Furthermore, I, the researcher, am a woman. I am currently an Associate Superintendent for a K-12 public school district in North Carolina. I have 22 years of experience in public education in North Carolina having filled numerous teaching and administrative roles. Because women may interpret and give meaning to their experiences in different ways as well as lead in ways sometimes contrary to men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Grogan, 1996;), this theoretical lens for examining the data and for interpreting the findings seemed best.

Brunner (1998) in her review of research on women in the superintendency listed ten benefits why this nature of research is useful to both women and men. The reasons included: a) the research helped answer the question of the underrepresentation of women in superintendent chairs; b) the research provided evidence that women can succeed in the superintendency; c) the research provided evidence that women may see, value, and know the world differently as compared to men; d) the research showed women superintendents who are important role models for other women aspiring to the position; e) the research helped people understand that women's different ways of seeing the world become more important as the job of superintendent undergoes significant changes; and f) such research helped to explain women administrators' career paths, gender specific expectations of the role, selection, retention, and potential to help change educational administration preparation programs.

### *Barriers Theory*

Next, this research uses models originally defined by Estler (1975) yet expanded upon by other researchers (Schmuck 1979; Hansot & Tyack, 1981; Shakeshaft, 1989; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009) to investigate the barriers that may prevent



women from attaining the superintendency. The models include the Woman's Place model, the Discrimination model, and the Meritocracy model. The Woman's Place model assumed that women did not participate in administrative careers due to social restrictions and norms that were perpetuated through successive generations that kept women defined to specific roles. These roles included family responsibilities and traditional women's duties centered on home life and lower status and lower paying positions outside the home. The Discrimination model drew upon the assumption that institutional patterns were the result of the efforts of one group to exclude participation of another. An example would be the "good old boys network" where men helped men to achieve upper level positions. The last model, the Meritocracy model, assumed that the most competent people were promoted, thus women may not be seen as competent as men. Therefore, fewer women were granted access to executive positions based on feminine behaviors, attitudes and lack of credentials. All of the variables under investigation regarding barriers in this study have been aligned to these three models. The alignment is documented in the Barrier Variables Matrix (Appendix A).

### *Resilience Theory*

Patterson and Kelleher's research (2005) on resilience skills employed by educational leaders also provides a framework for this study. These researchers identified 25 people who represented reflective writers, practitioners, and leaders in the area of educational leadership. Through experiences of the participants revealed through interviews, the researchers identified resilience as using energy productively to emerge from adversity stronger than ever. They also identified resilience as a multidimensional, research-based construct that offers a powerful set of tools to help educational leaders grow stronger and developmentally mature from adverse experiences. They posited that resilience is not a fixed-trait

phenomenon. It is developmental – meaning it can be learned and taught. From their findings, Patterson and Kelleher developed the Dimensions of Resilience. The three dimensions included: the interpretation of current adversity and future possibility, the resilience capacity to tackle adversity, and the actions needed to become more resilient in the face of adversity.

Patterson, Goens, and Reed (2008) built upon the Dimensions of Resilience in their recent research with superintendents. They found that resilient leaders possess the ability to recover, and they learn and grow stronger when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity. In addition, they posited that this leadership characteristic might be the most important of all. Bennis (2007) agreed. “I believe adaptive capacity or resilience is the single most important quality in a leader, or anyone else for that matter, who hopes to lead a healthy meaningful life” (p. 5).

Patterson et.al. (2008) provided strategies for the development of resilience in leaders. They defined these strategies as skill sets: resilience thinking skills, resilience capacity-building skills, and resilience action skills. Their strategies for developing skills are listed below.

*Resilience Thinking Skills:*

1. Anticipate and build contingency plans for ambiguity and complexity inherent in the reality of your organizational life.
2. Gather all relevant information, from as many credible sources as possible, about what is really happening relative to the adversity.
3. Work positively within the unavoidable constraints imposed by the reality of the adverse circumstances.

4. Find ways to have a personal influence in making good things happen in a bad situation.
5. Focus your energy on the opportunities, not the obstacles, found in the midst of adversity (but do not deny the obstacles).
6. Shift your thinking from “if only” thinking to “how can I” thinking when faced with tough times.

*Resilience Capacity-Building Skills:*

1. Be able to privately clarify and publicly articulate your core values in the face of the storm.
2. Consistently align your leadership actions with what matters most to you among competing values.
3. Try to understand your emotions during adversity and how those emotions affect your leadership performance.
4. Protect the necessary time and space to replenish your capacity to lead an emotionally, physically, and spiritually rich life.
5. Act on the courage of your convictions, despite the risks posed by the adversity.

*Resilience Action Skills:*

1. Flexibly change your strategies as conditions change.
2. Put your leadership mistakes in perspective, to relentlessly refuse to give up, unless it's absolutely clear that all realistic strategies have been exhausted.
3. Stay focused on what matters most among competing demands and distractions by outside forces until success is attained.

4. Take appropriate action under stress, even when some things about the situation are ambiguous or confusing.
5. Take personal responsibility for making tough decisions that may negatively affect some individuals or groups.
6. Act on the courage of your convictions, despite the risks posed by adversity.

### *Perseverance Theory*

If barriers are encountered by women as they aspire to and attain the executive leadership position of superintendent, then they may be classified as adverse experiences. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the dimensions and skills of resilience that women superintendents in North Carolina utilize. In addition, perseverance skills weave in quite well with resilience skills identified by Patterson et.al (2008). In strategy 3 under Resilience Action Skills, the researchers suggest to stay focused on what matters most among competing demands and distractions by outside forces until success is attained. If exhibiting resilience can be defined as “I can,” then perseverance may be defined as “I will.” It is the absolute resolve to complete long-term goals – no matter what. The matrix aligning resilience and perseverance variables to the framework is included in Appendix A.

### *The Conceptual Framework Model*

The conceptual framework model is displayed in Figure 1 as a visual representation of the articulated conceptual framework included in this chapter. It represents the journey of women who aspire to the superintendency in North Carolina. The journey is viewed using a theoretical lens of women’s ways of knowing and leading. The model shows that as women move upward in their pursuit, they encounter barriers, implement successful strategies, and then continue to move forward until they attain the superintendency.

# Women Superintendents in North Carolina

As Viewed through a WWK/L\* Theoretical Lens

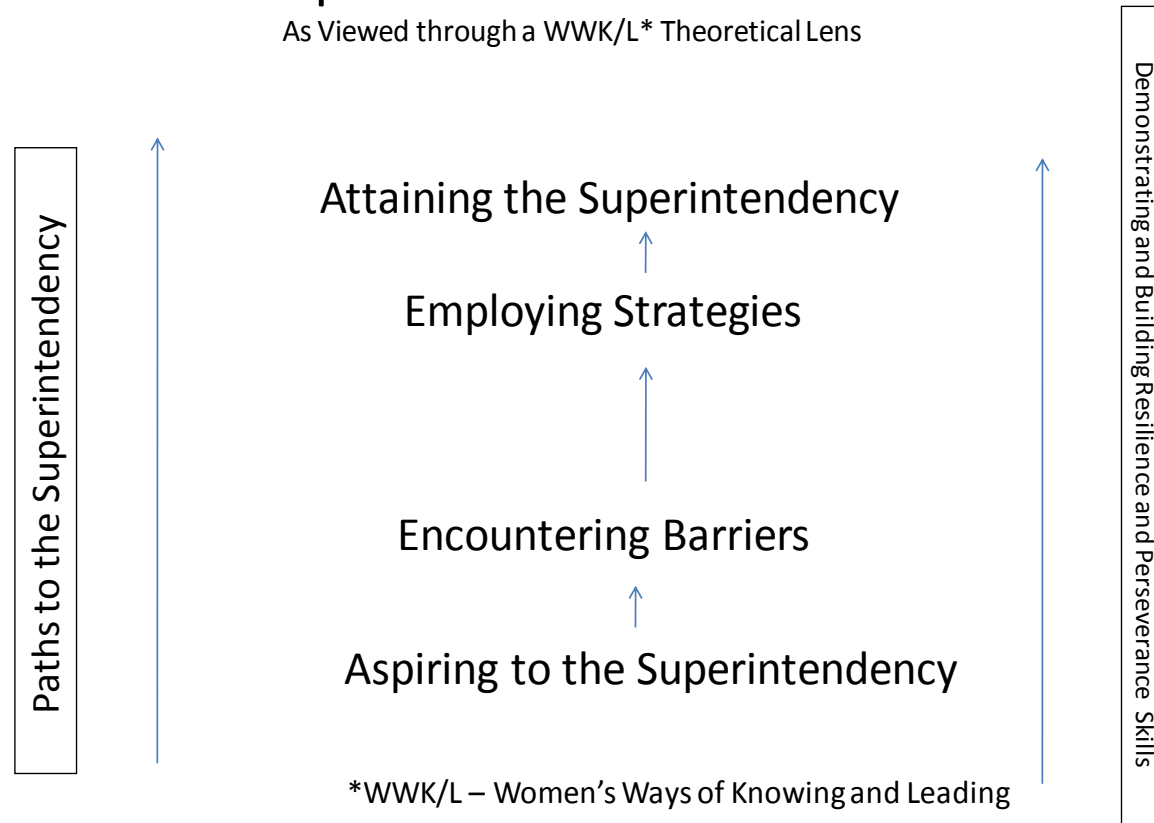


Figure 1. The conceptual framework model.

On the right side of the model is an upward arrow representing the continuous growth and development of resilience and perseverance skills that occur during the climb to the superintendency. On the left side is a vertical arrow that suggests women's paths to the superintendency are hierarchical.

The metaphor of a labyrinth portrays the journey of women aspiring to the superintendency. A labyrinth conveys the idea of a complex journey that entails challenges all along the journey yet offers a goal worth striving for in the end. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires perseverance, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the obstacles that lie ahead. For women who aspire to attain executive leadership positions, routes to this goal do exist but can present both expected and unexpected twists and turns. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to their center, it is understood that goals are, in fact, attainable. But passing through a labyrinth is more demanding than traveling a straight path. Therefore, the labyrinth provides a realistic metaphor for aspiring women and recognition of the challenges that these women face (Eagly & Carli, 2009).

#### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter included a review of the literature relevant to women superintendents. Also, the conceptual framework guiding this study and informed by the research questions was included with subsections regarding the theoretical lens used to investigate the topic, barriers theory, resilience theory, perseverance theory, and the conceptual framework model. The methodology selected for this research will be discussed in the following chapter.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The number of public school women superintendents pales in comparison to the number of men superintendents across the nation. The statistics for North Carolina are nearly identical. The purpose of this research was to explore possible reasons for this imbalance by investigating perceptions of current women superintendents in North Carolina. Traditional models attributed this dearth of women superintendents to overt and covert discrimination against women, existent socialization processes that define societal roles for women and men, androcentric tendencies of society and the bureaucracy itself, and limiting or self-limiting behaviors of women (Shakeshaft, 1989). Therefore, in order to gain a clearer understanding of what may deter or assist those women who aspire to the superintendency, the following research questions were developed.

#### *Research Questions*

1. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about barriers women may encounter in their pursuit of the public school superintendency in North Carolina?
2. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about effective strategies women may use in attaining the public school superintendency in North Carolina?
3. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about resilience and perseverance skills women may use to overcome adversity in attaining and sustaining the superintendency?
4. What are the career paths of women superintendents in North Carolina?

These research questions provided the direction for this study to elucidate the perceptions of women superintendents regarding barriers, successful strategies for navigating those barriers, career pathways that led to the superintendency, and resilience and perseverance skills that enabled aspirants to succeed. The theoretical lens of women's ways of knowing and leading was used to investigate the issue and to interpret the findings.

### *The Descriptive Research Design*

A descriptive research design was selected for this study. The design selection was made based on the research questions and the conceptual framework which provided the premise for this research. Surveys and interviews were used to collect information from the participants. In addition, resumes or vitae were requested in order to collect data regarding the career pathways that led to the superintendency.

### *Rationale for a Descriptive Research Design*

A descriptive study describes the way things are and is useful for investigating a variety of educational issues (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Descriptive research also involves making careful descriptions of education phenomena. Quantitative descriptive studies are carried out to obtain information about the preferences, attitudes, practices, and perceptions of a group of people (Gay & Airasian, 2000). Alreck and Settle (2004) state that perceptions are what really count; they facilitate the discovery of trends and the prediction of where things are going. Since the intent of this research was to document the existing perceptions of women superintendents regarding barriers they encountered and strategies they used to attain the superintendency, descriptive design was considered appropriate.



### *Description of the Study Parameters*

The purpose of this research was to investigate specific variables pertaining to women superintendents in North Carolina. They were:

- 1) Perceptions of women superintendents of barriers they encountered in attaining the superintendency
- 2) Perceptions of women superintendents of effective strategies they employed to attain the superintendency
- 3) Perceptions of women superintendents of resilience and perseverance skills they used to attain the superintendency
- 4) Demographic and biographic details of the women superintendents
- 5) Career paths of women superintendents that led to the superintendency
- 6) Women's ways of knowing and leading

### *Data Sources*

The data sources for this research included the sample receiving the survey, the sample selected for the follow-up interviews, the survey instrument, professional resumes or vitae and the interview protocol established as a follow-up to the survey. Each of the sources is outlined below.

### *Selection of the Sample Receiving the Survey*

The sample for the survey was drawn from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's 2010 superintendent directory. The source revealed 18 women currently serving as state district superintendents and two women serving as superintendents of federal districts located in the state. The potential participants were identified as women by their title (Ms., Mrs., or Miss) as well as by their first names. In cases where the first names could be

identified with either men or women, for example “Ashley,” I reviewed the district websites for pictures and other gender-identifying materials in order to conclude whether the individual in question was man or woman. In addition to this initial list of potential participants, I received the names of six other women who had served as superintendents within the past five years prior to 2010 from my colleagues. These additional six superintendents were added to the sample since the number of current women serving as superintendents was fairly small. Also, I concluded that the women who had served within the past five years may still be familiar enough with their experiences to provide enlightening data. The sample group was purposefully limited to only women superintendents and to only those serving in North Carolina due to the specific focus of this research. Therefore, the sample for the survey consisted of 26 current or recently past women superintendents in North Carolina.

#### *Selection of the Interview Sample*

The sample for the follow-up interview was initially determined from the list of participants in the survey who voluntarily agreed to be considered for the interview and who provided their names and contact information. From this initial sample, I purposefully selected cases based on maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling cut across the ranges of variation such as age, marital status, experience, number of superintendencies, and size of district in order to search for common patterns across variation (Patton, 2002). After analyzing the personal and professional demographic data collected through the survey instrument, I selected four cases for the final interview sample considering them representative of the initial sample. I made contact with the participants to verify their potential involvement and to establish a time for interview data collection.

### *Survey Instrument and its Development*

A revision of the survey instrument *Questionnaire on Perceptions of Barriers and Strategies Impacting on Women Securing the Superintendency* (Dulac, 1992) was used with modifications to collect data for this study. Permission was obtained to use the revised instrument. The questionnaire consisted of items to identify perceived barriers and effective strategies and was modified to include items on resilience and perseverance skills. The survey also included a section to elicit demographic as well as biographic data. Finally, open-ended questions were incorporated into the survey instrument to enhance questionnaire responses as suggested by Alreck and Settle (2004).

The original survey instrument was developed by Dulac (1992) for her study of women superintendents. The Dulac questionnaire consisted of 18 demographic and biographic questions that addressed the personal and professional characteristics of women in the superintendency. The following two sections contained 30 statements each utilizing a Likert scale to determine perceptions of barriers and strategies. The Likert scale was chosen by Dulac for its appropriateness in collecting information on perceptions. Scoring was completed by computing the numerical value for rating barriers from “1” representing not a barrier to “5” representing a major barrier. Scoring for rating strategies was coded from “1” not successful to “5” representing highly successful. The reliability and validity of the instrument was established by Dulac in her dissertation study:

When using Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient, a computed application of data determined a reliability coefficient of 0.96 for barriers and 0.86 for strategies. Content validity of the questionnaire was established by submitting it to two experts in the area of women in administration. Dr. Catherine Marshall and Dr. Jean Stockard

confirmed their review of the instrument and made some suggestions for improving it. A Boston College statistician also analyzed the instrument format and provided suggestions to facilitate coding. Pilot study participants were also asked to critique the instrument and indicate ambiguities. The questionnaire was revised according to suggestions. (p. 74)

The instrument then underwent revision by Anderson (1998) who used it in her study regarding perceptions of women superintendents.

To provide the sample with a more concise questionnaire, statements in the original questionnaire that did not relate to the hypotheses of this study were eliminated.

These changes did not impact the reliability or validity previously tested by Dr.

Dulac. The revised instrument was reviewed for clarity and content by conducting a pilot study of 50 women superintendents. The altered instrument consisted of 14 questions that addressed the personal and professional characteristics of women in superintendency-level positions and two sections of 21 statements each utilizing a Likert scale to determine perceptions of barriers and strategies of women to attaining the superintendency. (p. 54)

Lee (2000) used Anderson's version of the revised instrument in her doctoral research pertaining to women superintendents in Virginia. Most recently, Wickham (2008) modified the instrument by scaling the items down further to reflect the current literature and proceeded to use it in her research on women superintendents in California. Wickham's revised instrument was the instrument used in this study (Appendix C).

In addition to the established sections on demographics, barriers, and strategies in the survey instrument used by Wickham (2008), I added 15 items associated with resilience

skills as identified in the research by Patterson et al. (2008). Also, six more items associated with The Grit Scale by Duckworth et al. (2007) were included to collect data on perseverance skills. These 21 items were added to customize the revised instrument from Wickham (2008) to meet study conditions (Appendix C). The 21 items were piloted. Results and feedback regarding the items were used to develop the final version of the survey instrument.

### *Interview Protocol and its Development*

Researchers conduct interviews in order to gain another person's perspective (Patton, 2002). In order to enter the world of a woman superintendent and to better understand her experiences, I chose to incorporate follow-up interviews. Patton (2002) identified four variations of interview instrumentation: informal conversational interview, interview guide approach, standardized open-ended interview, and closed, fixed response interview. This study used the interview guide approach where the questions were framed around the results of the survey findings in order to elicit opinions, views, and experiences of the women superintendent participants. According to Patton (2002), the purpose of an interview guide, a predetermined list of questions, is to ensure that the same questions are asked to each participant. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stated, "Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings" (p.62). This approach was an appropriate choice since it was my desire to probe deeper into the specific responses elicited by the survey in order to gain a deeper understanding of the survey findings. Also by linking the questions on the interview guide (Appendix D) back to the results of the survey, triangulation of data could be achieved to enhance the validity of the findings. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

### *Resumes and Vitae*

Resumes and vitae from the women superintendent participants were also used as a data source. Data regarding career pathways were collected from the documents noting number and variety of positions held, length of time each position was held, and the entry position into the superintendency.

### *Data Treatment and Analysis*

The data treatment and analysis were customized to meet the study conditions. The survey and interview data were collected, stored, and analyzed in a confidential manner as outlined in the IRB guidelines of the study. Reliability and validity of the survey instrument were established prior to this study. Interview data were credited as valid based on meeting three of Creswell's eight verification procedures used to establish validity in qualitative research (2003). The three verification procedures were triangulation of the data, clarification of researcher bias, and member checking.

Triangulation of the data was achieved by using multiple data-collection methods. Both the survey and the interview guide collected data pertaining to the same variables identified in the literature, outlined in the research questions, and informed by the conceptual framework. Early findings from the survey data were used to create the follow-up interview questions found in the interview guide.

Next, validity was established by clarification of researcher bias. I noted my own subjectivity and monitored it throughout the research. I remained aware of my personal identity, values, and personality and the role they played in my position as researcher. Glesne (1999) stated that researchers must clearly define their roles as researchers and learners before, during, and after data collection.

Efforts were made to establish validity by incorporating member checking. Creswell (2003) stated that validity could be established by researchers if they shared interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report with the research participants to make sure they and their ideas were represented accurately. All participants were given transcripts of their interviews to verify and edit. In addition, participants in the survey sample were given an opportunity to submit their contact information in order to receive a copy of the dissertation draft resulting from this research.

#### *Descriptive Statistics for Survey Data*

Descriptive statistics were used to interpret the survey data. Descriptive statistics are mathematical techniques for organizing and summarizing a set of numerical data (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). For this study, I chose to display the survey data in tables with frequencies and percentages. This technique was selected to allow myself and others to see the complete set of scores. Furthermore, the percentages of variables receiving ratings of “4” or “5” were combined since these rankings were considered to indicate major barriers, successful strategies, or commonly used resilience and perseverance skills. This was done in order to determine the variables considered significant by the greatest percentage of participants.

The chi-square goodness of fit test was performed on the data collected from the variables in the sections on the survey pertaining to barriers, strategies, and resilience and perseverance skills. This nonparametric analysis was chosen to compare the expected results with the observed results. The test yielded significance levels of differences for each of the variables. Because the sample was small in size, the frequencies were weighted to accurately represent the larger sample of all women superintendents in the state and to make the

statistical findings more precise. Data from these analyses were placed into the original tables displaying the frequency distributions and percentages of responses for each variable.

The demographic and biographic data collected from the survey were displayed in tables with frequencies and percentages to show the distribution of the responses. Frequency data from these tables were used to determine the typical profile of a woman superintendent currently serving in North Carolina.

#### *Distributing the Survey and Collecting Data*

An email was sent to each woman superintendent in the sample introducing the study in a cover letter (Appendix C). Included in the email was the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) Informed Consent for Participants, the link to the online survey instrument, and the request for participants to submit their resumes or vitae as attachments to a reply email. After participants read the email and the IRB Informed Consent for Participants, they were directed to click on the link to begin the survey. The form for the survey was created using Google Documents. Each survey item was created as a "mandatory response" so participants would be less likely to accidentally skip an item before submitting their completed survey. Once participants clicked on the survey link in the introductory email, they were taken to the survey form. As participants entered their responses digitally into the form, the data were automatically entered into a Google Documents' secured database. The survey data were collected during a 10-day window. Five days into the window, participants were sent a reminder email requesting completion of the survey and submission of their resumes or vitae. At the end of the 10-day data collection period, the survey was closed and the data were extracted into a secured Excel spreadsheet where they were stored on the researcher's personal computer. The online data stored in the Google Document was deleted, and



electronic access to the survey was turned off. When the Google Document database was downloaded, the data were saved in an Excel spreadsheet. By saving the data in spreadsheet format, they were immediately ready for descriptive analysis. Contact information regarding volunteers for the follow-up interviews was extracted and tagged for use in the interview sample selection.

### *Interview Protocol*

At the close of the survey, I chose the interview sample based on maximum variation sampling as described in the selection of the interview sample process. I contacted those chosen for interviews by email to set up times for the interviews. The follow-up interviews were conducted by phone at prearranged appointments chosen by the participants at times convenient for them. Participants were made aware that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed. They were also reminded of their rights and responsibilities to review and validate the transcripts. The research questions as well as the findings from the survey guided the formation of the seven open-ended questions in the interview guide (Appendix D). Interviews took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Once the interviews were transcribed and verified by the participants, I extracted the data and arranged them into a matrix for coding and preliminary analysis. The next section describes how the data were analyzed.

### *Processing Interview Data*

According to Glesne (1999), data analysis in qualitative inquiry is an iterative process of reading and re-reading, thinking and re-thinking, and organizing and re-organizing to interpret data. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them verbatim to immerse myself in the data. Patton (2002) suggests that transcribing offers a point of transition between data collection and analysis as well as “provides an opportunity to get immersed in

the data, an experience that usually generates emergent insights” (p.441). To increase this possibility, each transcript was checked for accuracy by listening to the tapes while reading the transcripts.

Next, I returned the transcripts to the participants to ensure accuracy and to solicit verification. The participants returned their comments, suggestions for edits, and verifications that the information obtained via the interview protocol was indeed accurate. Interview tapes were identified with pseudonyms and case numbers prior to the initial transcription. During the transcription of the interviews and presentation of results, pseudonyms continued to be used to ensure anonymity for the participants.

Answers to each interview question were then grouped together so that all responses to individual interview questions could be analyzed as part of the iterative data analysis process. This process was used to compare the codes developed with each data set and to ensure that all data were included in the analysis process. For each interview question, participants were assigned a different color which enabled me to easily distinguish between individual participant responses. The codes from the interview formats were developed or expanded and refined or combined throughout the data analytic process.

Following the development of coded data, similar chunks of coded data were combined, condensed, and examined to identify emergent themes. A cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) assisted in the process of identifying, formulating and developing themes between the individual participant’s views of their roles, responsibilities and experiences.

### *Role of the Researcher*

The role of the researcher in this study was one of translator and interpreter. As Glesne (1998) stated, “The researcher is sometimes described as a translator of culture. The researcher works to understand the others’ world and then to translate the text of lived actions into a meaningful account” (p. 156). In addition, the role of the researcher was to collect and interpret the data in an ethical, secure, confidential and objective manner as much as possible. Confidentiality was maintained throughout each phase of the study, and every effort was made to protect the anonymity of research participants.

### *Ethical Assurances*

Ethical guidelines established by the IRB were implemented early on in the research planning and were practiced throughout each phase of the study. I participated in ethics training as required for researchers by the IRB prior to conducting this study. As the researcher, my role was to understand and state my assumptions, biases and beliefs prior to beginning the research as well as throughout the entire process. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest it is critical to address researcher subjectivity in an effort to provide the reader with the necessary information to determine the credibility of the findings. The term “Subjective I” first coined by Peshkin (1988) to refer to areas of his own bias, can incorporate various perspectives. As the researcher in this study, I am acutely aware of the assumptions, biases, and beliefs that may affect the lens through which I see the data.

### *Woman I*

I am a woman researcher conducting research on women about a topic where the focus is on perceptions of women, and where the findings may be of special interest to women. I understand that my being a woman may increase my subjectivity regarding the

issues under investigation. However, I also realize that women are different from one another, and that although we all have “being a woman” in common, our beliefs and experiences are unique and varied. Throughout the research process, I have continually asked the question, “How does my being a woman affect this component of the research?” Just as with any researcher, my subjectivity is present. However, I have made a concentrated effort to recognize my subjectivity and to keep it minimized throughout the research process.

#### *Administrator I*

I am an associate superintendent for a public school district in North Carolina. I aspire to the superintendency. Hence, my professional career pathway and aspirations are closely linked to this research. Gay and Airasian (2000) suggest that it is difficult to be both involved and unbiased. Yet Glesne (1999) explains that an awareness of one’s subjectivities can minimize the potential for misconstruing, shaping, skewing or distorting data to prevent the researcher from seeing what is not there, in an effort to temper subjectivity. As a researcher I approached my study with an awareness of my subjectivities as I searched for the implicit meaning in the experiences of the woman superintendent participants.

In addition to ethical assurances being addressed throughout the research, trustworthiness was considered. Data collected from the survey were reviewed and verified for accuracy. Interview data were reviewed for accuracy throughout the transcribing process, and verification was obtained on the accuracy of the data by the interview participants in order to add to the validity of the findings.

#### *Delimitations to the Study*

This research focused only on women currently serving or those who had served within the previous five years prior to 2010 as superintendents in public school districts

including two federal districts in North Carolina. The two federal districts included a major military base and a Native American reservation. The study did not address private, non-public, or parochial school settings. The study also did not address women who aspire to the superintendency but have yet to attain since the research focus was on women who successfully held the executive position. In conclusion, the study findings will be based on only one perspective, which is the perspective of the women superintendents involved in the study.

### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter presented the research methodology for exploring the perceptions of women superintendents in North Carolina regarding barriers encountered, and strategies, resilience and perseverance skills they may have used in attaining the superintendent position. The methodology was directed by the conceptual framework and guided by the research questions. A rationale for utilizing descriptive methodology for this study was presented as were the methods of data collection, instruments and analysis. Finally, ethical assurances and limitations were discussed. The results of this study are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study was conducted to examine the perceptions of women school superintendents in North Carolina in order to gain insight into why there are so few women who make it into the position. The specific perceptions under investigation were possible barriers women encountered in aspiring to and in attaining the superintendency, the successful strategies they used to navigate the barriers, and the resilience and perseverance skills they employed to overcome barriers to successful attainment of a superintendency. In addition, the career path and demographic and biographic information of these women and the districts they served were investigated so that a current superintendent profile summary of North Carolina women school superintendents could be created. The following research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about barriers women may encounter in their pursuit of the public school superintendency in North Carolina?
2. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about effective strategies women may use in attaining the public school superintendency in North Carolina?
3. What are the perceptions of women superintendents about resilience and perseverance skills women may use to overcome adversity in attaining and sustaining the superintendency?
4. What are the career paths of women superintendents in North Carolina?

This chapter reports the findings from the study. The data collected from the survey including descriptive statistical data pertaining to barriers, strategies, and resilience and perseverance skills are displayed here. Also included are the demographic and biographic data obtained from the survey as well as the career path data provided from the resumes and vitae collected. Finally, the interview data are presented with descriptions of the participants and the themes revealed from the qualitative data analysis.

### *The Survey Data*

#### *Survey Participation*

The sample for the survey was drawn from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's 2010 superintendent directory (NCDPI, 2010). The source revealed 18 women currently serving as state district superintendents and two women serving as superintendents of federal districts located in the state. Six other women superintendents who had served as district superintendents within the last five years prior to 2010 were added to the sample group and were invited to participate in the research. The sample group was purposefully limited to only women school superintendents serving in North Carolina due to the specific focus of this research.

All 26 women were contacted via email regarding the study. Once the survey opened for the 10-day data collection period, 10 women superintendents responded. I then sent out a reminder email to the potential participants five days into the data collection period. Four more women responded bringing the total to 14 for a participation rate of 54%.

#### *Demographic and Biographic Data*

The survey began with 15 items requesting demographic and biographic data as well as one open-ended item asking participants to list their last position held immediately

preceding the superintendency. The results have been organized and are displayed in the following tables.

**Table 1.** Current Age of Women Superintendents

Age	Frequency	Percent
Under 30	0	0
30-39	1	7.1
40-49	1	7.1
50-59	8	57.1
60 or over	4	28.6
Total	14	100.0

Table 1 shows that the majority, 8 or 57.1%, of the participants in this study were in the age range of 50-59. The youngest participating superintendent was 30-39, and 85.7% were 50 or over.

**Table 2.** Marital Status

Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Single	0	0
Married	12	85.7
Widowed	0	0
Divorced or separated	2	14.3
Partnered	0	0
Total	14	100.0

Table 2 shows that the majority, 12 or 85.7%, of the participants were married. Two of the participants were divorced or separated.



**Table 3.** Number of Children in School (K-12)

School-age children	Frequency	Percent
None	11	78.6
One	2	14.3
Two	1	7.1
Three	0	0
Four or more	0	0
Total	14	100.0

Table 3 shows that the majority, 11 or 78.6%, of the superintendents in this study had no K-12 school-age children. One participant had two K-12 school-age children, and two each had one child K-12 school-age.

**Table 4.** Age of Youngest Child

Age	Frequency	Percent
No children	1	7.1
Under five years old	0	0
5-12 years old	1	7.1
13-19 years old	1	7.1
20 years old or above	11	78.6
Total	14	100.0

Table 4 shows that 78.6% had no specific child care responsibilities that otherwise might have encumbered some of their time for the job.

**Table 5.** Racial/Ethnic Origin

Race/Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Native American	0	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0
Hispanic	0	0
Black/non-Hispanic	1	7.1
White/non-Hispanic	13	92.9
Multi-racial	0	0
Total	14	100.0

Table 5 shows that the majority of participants in this study, 13 or 92.9%, were white/non-Hispanic. Only one, 7.1%, was minority black/non-Hispanic.

**Table 6.** Highest Degree Earned

Degree	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor's	0	0
Master's	0	0
Doctorate	14	100.0
Total	14	100.0

Table 6 shows that all participants, 14 or 100%, held doctorates. Later in the analysis, this particular finding will reveal itself to have been particularly important in shaping the perceptions of these women.

**Table 7.** Metro Status Where Employed of Current or Last Position

Metro status	Frequency	Percent
Urban <i>(Population 100,000+)</i>	2	14.3
Suburban <i>(Population 10,000-99,999)</i>	7	50.0
Town <i>(Population 2,500-9,999)</i>	3	21.4
Rural <i>(Population less than 2,500)</i>	2	14.3
Total	14	100.0

Table 7 shows that half of the participants, 7 or 50%, were employed in suburban areas where the population was 10,000 to 99,999. Two participants, 14.3%, were employed in the largest urban areas with populations 100,000 or greater, and two, 14.3%, were employed in the smallest rural areas with populations less than 2,500.

**Table 8.** ADM\* of Current or Last District

ADM	Frequency	Percent
Under 3,000	0	0
3,000-9,999	10	71.4
10,000-39,999	3	21.4
40,000 or above	1	7.1
Total	14	100.0

\*Average Daily Membership

Table 8 shows that the majority of participants, 10 or 71.4%, were employed in districts where the average daily membership of their student population was 3,000 to 9,999.

**Table 9.** Number of Years in Education

Years in education	Frequency	Percent
10 years or less	0	0
11-15 years	0	0
16-20 years	1	7.1
21-25 years	1	7.1
26-30 years	3	21.4
More than 30 years	9	64.3
Total	14	100.0

Table 9 shows that all participants had 16 or more years in education. However, most, 12 or 85.7%, had 26 or more years.

**Table 10.** Currently Employed as a Superintendent

Currently employed	Frequency	Percent
Yes	9	64.3
No	5	35.7
Total	14	100.0

Table 10 shows that the majority of the participants, 9 or 64.3%, were currently employed as a superintendent. It is safe to assume that the five not currently employed as superintendents were retired from the position based on the nature of the sampling.

**Table 11.** Source of Hire for Present or Last Superintendent Position

Source of hire	Frequency	Percent
From Within	5	35.7
Recommended	0	0
Professional Search Firm	6	42.9
Sought Position	2	14.3
Other	1	7.1
Total	14	100.0

Table 11 shows that the largest group of study participants, 6 or 42.9%, were employed using professional search firms. Eleven of the 14 superintendents, or 78.6%, were hired from within or by using professional search firms.

**Table 12.** Number of Superintendent Positions Held

Positions	Frequency	Percent
One	8	57.1
Two	4	28.6
Three or More	2	14.3
Total	14	100.0

Table 12 shows that the majority of the participants, 12 or 85.7%, held one or two superintendent positions.

**Table 13.** Age at First Superintendency

Age	Frequency	Percent
Under 25 years	0	0
25-29 years	0	0
30-39 years	2	14.3
40-49 years	7	50.0
50-59 years	5	35.7
60 or over	0	0
Total	14	100.0

Table 13 shows that the majority of participants, 12 or 85.7%, were 40 years old or older when they attained their first superintendent positions. Only two, 14.3%, were under 40.

**Table 14.** Number of Years in the Superintendency

Years in office	Frequency	Percent
One	3	21.4
Two	0	0
Three	0	0
Four	0	0
Five or More	11	78.6
Total	14	100.0

Table 14 shows that the majority of participants, 11 or 78.6%, had five or more years in the superintendency. Three of the participants, or 21.4%, just completed their first year.

**Table 15.** Position Held Immediately Preceding the Superintendency

Position	Frequency	Percent
Associate Superintendent (Curriculum and Instruction)	1	7.1
Associate Superintendent (Non-specified)	3	21.4
Assistant Superintendent (Non-specified)	5	35.7
Assistant Superintendent (Curriculum and Instruction)	1	7.1
Assistant Superintendent (Assistance/Support to Schools)	1	7.1
Assistant Superintendent (Secondary)	1	7.1
Chief Academic Officer	1	7.1
Out of state Superintendent	1	7.1
Total	14	100.0

Table 15 shows that the majority of the participants, 12 or 85.7%, were assistant or associate superintendents in their positions immediately preceding the superintendency.

*Superintendent Profile Summary.* The typical current woman superintendent in North Carolina is white, between the ages of 50-59, and is married. She currently has no K-12 school-age children, and the age of her youngest child is 20 years or older. She holds a doctorate and works in a suburban setting with a population of 10,000 to 99,999 people in the community. Her average daily student membership is 3,000 to 9,999 students. She is currently serving in the superintendency and has 26 or more years of experience in education. The typical woman superintendent was hired for her first superintendency when she was 40-49 years old with the assistance of a professional search firm where she left an assistant or associate superintendent position. She has served five or more years in the superintendency in one or two superintendent positions.

#### *Research Question 1: Perceptions of Barriers*

The first research question to be answered in this study was: What are the perceptions of women superintendents about barriers women may encounter in their pursuit of the public school superintendency in North Carolina? The survey included a section with 15 items relating to women superintendents' perceptions of barriers women might typically face in seeking and attaining the superintendency. Participants were asked to rate the barrier items from "1" - *Not a major barrier* to "5" - *A major barrier*.

The quantitative data from the survey pertaining to barriers are included in the following tables. The frequency distributions and percentages of participants responding to each Likert scale number for each item are displayed. Also, the results of the chi-square goodness of fit test including chi-square statistics, degrees of freedom, and the asymptotic significances are included in the tables. The significance level was set at .05.

**Table 16.**  
Perceptions of Barriers

Barrier	<i>Not a major barrier</i>		2		3		4		<i>A major barrier</i>		<i>Chi-square goodness of fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
1 Conflicting demands of career and family	2	14	0	0	3	21	5	36	4	29	1.429	3	0.699
2 Lack of ability to relocate	2	14	1	7	2	14	5	36	4	29	3.857	4	0.426
3 Belief that women are not good administrators	4	29	1	7	4	29	5	36	0	0	2.571	3	0.463
4 Inappropriate career paths	7	50	3	21	4	29	0	0	0	0	1.857	2	0.395
5 Socialization to "proper" roles for men and women	3	21	3	21	7	50	1	7	0	0	5.429	3	0.143
6 Predominance of male candidates for administrative positions	2	14	3	21	4	29	2	14	3	21	1.000	4	0.91
7 Lack of a male mentor/sponsor	3	21	5	36	5	36	1	7	0	0	3.143	3	0.37

Barrier	<i>Not a major barrier</i>		2		3		4		<i>A major barrier</i>		<i>Chi-square goodness of fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
8 Gender bias in screening and selection process	2	14	3	21	6	43	2	14	1	7	5.286	4	0.259
9 Overt gender discrimination	6	43	3	21	4	29	1	7	0	0	3.714	3	0.294
10 Exclusion from informal socialization process of the "Good Old Boy Network"	1	7	4	29	2	14	5	36	2	14	3.857	4	0.426
11 Lack of knowledge and understanding within political realm	8	57	1	7	3	21	1	7	1	7	13.143	4	*0.011
12 Lack of motivation by women to compete	4	29	6	43	0	0	3	21	1	7	3.714	3	0.294



Barrier	<i>Not a major barrier</i>		2		3		4		<i>A major barrier</i>		<i>Chi-square goodness of fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
13 The belief by others that women must be better qualified than men	1	7	1	7	5	36	6	43	1	7	8.857	4	0.065
14 Covert gender discrimination	1	7	4	29	5	36	1	7	3	21	4.571	4	0.334
15 Professional search firm's role in selection process	5	36	5	36	3	21	1	7	0	0	3.143	3	0.37

\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

Women superintendents ranked the following as major barriers: a) conflict of career and family demands; b) lack of ability to relocate as a result of personal commitment; c) exclusion from the informal socialization process of the “good old boy” network; and d) the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men. These barriers had the greatest percentage of participants ranking them at “4” or “5” as major barriers.

The barriers that had the lowest percentage of participants ranking them as “4” or “5” were: a) inappropriate career paths; b) socialization to “proper” roles for men and women; c) lack of a male mentor or sponsor; d) overt gender discrimination; and, e) professional search firms’ role in the selection process. However, socialization to “proper” roles for men and women had 50% of the participants rate the barrier at “3” or above.

The chi-square analysis showed only one item at or below the .05 significance level for comparing observed versus expected results. The test revealed that lack of knowledge and understanding within the political realm had a significance level of .011. The frequency of the scale scores revealed that eight participants rated the item as “1” – *Not a major barrier*, one participant rated the item as “2,” one rated the item as “3,” one rated the item as “4,” and one rated the items as “5” – *A major barrier*. Therefore, the chi-square analysis revealed that the participants generally saw this item as a significant “non-barrier.”

It is important to note why the chi-square may have yielded so few significant differences. First, the small sample size,  $N=14$ , could have been a factor because any distribution across the scale yielded a fairly large percentage. Only one response in a scale level would have consumed 7.1% of the distribution therefore making everyone a potential outlier. Second, because  $N=14$ , there were fewer degrees of freedom thereby making

significance, even at the .05 level more challenging. Finally, the decision to treat each scale score (1-5) as a finite factor allowed too much distribution spread.

When combining scale scores 1 and 2 into one category to consider them as non-barriers and when combining scale scores 4 and 5 into one category to consider them as barriers, this left scale score 3 alone as the expected value. Upon doing this, the distribution changed as well as the degrees of freedom and the significant differences. When computing chi-square in this manner, the following barriers were identified as significant:

**Table 17.**  
Regrouped Chi-square Test on Barriers

Barrier	$\chi^2$	$df$	*Asymp. Sig.
1 Conflicting demands of career and family	6.143	2	*0.046
2 Lack of ability to relocate	6.143	2	*0.046
9 Overt gender discrimination	7.000	2	*0.030
11 Lack of knowledge and understanding within political realm	6.143	2	*0.046
15 Professional search firm's role in selection process	9.571	2	*0.008

*\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.*

The regrouped scale scores yielded four additional barriers at the .05 or greater level of significance compared to the original chi-square results exhibited in Table 16. However, the last three constructs in the table above showed significant differences as being non-barriers due to the majority of participants rating the variables at level “1” or level “2.”

Conflicting demands of career and family and lack of ability to relocate align with the results of the frequency distributions prioritized list of barriers.

In addition to the 15 barrier items in the survey, there was one open-ended question that asked participants to list barriers they encountered that were not included among the survey items.

The participants submitted the following:

- 1) National trend of hiring superintendents who are executives with experience outside of education.
- 2) Inability of spouse to relocate.
- 3) Perception that women are not good decision makers or administrators.
- 4) Men and women typically preferring to work for a man rather than a woman.
- 5) Women's emotional intelligence and compassion perceived as weaknesses instead of strengths.
- 6) Women's experience being mostly in curriculum rather than operations.
- 7) Women's difficulty of being acknowledged as competent and professional.

In addition to the specific barriers listed above, a few participants listed additional thoughts or perceptions in the open-ended item. One participant stated that she experienced no barriers in attaining the superintendency. Another stated, "Barriers are not gender specific." One final participant believed that women's experiences must be "strong and long" in order to be considered for the position.

#### *Research Question 2: Perceptions of Strategies*

The second research question of the study was: What are the perceptions of women superintendents about effective strategies women may use in attaining the public school

superintendency in North Carolina? The survey included 15 items relating to women superintendents' perceptions of successful strategies they employed to attain the superintendency. Participants were asked to rate the items from "1" – *Not a successful strategy* to "5" – *Highly successful strategy*.

The quantitative data from the survey pertaining to successful strategies are displayed in Table 18. The frequency distributions and percentages of participants responding to each Likert scale number for each item are displayed. Also, the results of the chi-square goodness of fit test including chi-square statistics, degrees of freedom, and the asymptotic significances are included in the tables. The significance level is set at .05.

**Table 18.**  
Perceptions of Strategies

Strategy	<i>Not a successful strategy</i>		2		3		4		<i>Highly successful strategy</i>		<i>Chi-square goodness of fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
1 Increasing visibility in professional circles	0	0	0	0	3	21	4	29	7	50	1.857	2	0.395
2 Obtaining a doctoral degree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	100	Variable is constant. No test.		
3 Formulating and adhering to a plan of action to achieve career goals	0	0	0	0	2	14	6	43	6	43	2.286	2	0.319
4 Preparing an effective resume/vita	0	0	0	0	4	29	4	29	6	43	0.571	2	0.751
5 Utilizing a women's network, similar to the "Good Old Boy Network"	1	7	2	14	8	57	3	21	0	0	8.286	3	*0.04
6 Gaining access to community power groups	0	0	1	7	4	29	6	43	3	21	3.714	3	0.294

Strategy	<i>Not a successful strategy</i>		2		3		4		<i>Highly successful strategy</i>		<i>Chi-square goodness of fit</i>		
	1		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
7 Enlisting a male mentor/sponsor	0	0	1	7	5	36	3	21	5	36	3.143	3	0.370
8 Developing a strong self concept	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	13	93	10.286	1	*0.001
9 Obtaining family support	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	13	93	10.286	1	*0.0001
10 Learning coping skills to balance conflicting demands of career and family	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14	12	86	7.143	1	*0.008
11 Enlisting a female mentor/sponsor	2	14	0	0	5	36	3	21	4	29	1.429	3	0.6999
12 Strategically preparing for broadening district level experience	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14	12	86	7.143	1	*0.008

Strategy	<i>Not a successful strategy</i>		2		3		4		<i>Highly successful strategy</i>		<i>Chi-square goodness of fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
13 Increasing flexibility to relocate	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	29	10	71	2.571	1	0.109
14 Seeking out professional search firms	1	7	1	7	7	50	4	29	1	7	10.286	4	*0.036
15 Pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14	12	86	7.143	1	*0.008

*\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.*



The strategies that were ranked the highest among the women superintendent participants were: a) obtaining a doctoral degree; b) developing a strong self concept; c) obtaining family support; d) learning coping skills to balance conflicting demands of career and family; e) strategically preparing for broadening district level experience; f) increasing flexibility to relocate; and, g) pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure. These strategies had the greatest percentage of participants rating them at “4” or “5” as highly successful strategies.

The strategies that had the lowest percentage of participants rating them as “4” or “5” were: a) utilizing a women’s network similar to the “good old boys” network; and, b) seeking out professional search firms. However, both of these strategies had 50% or more of the participants rating them at “3” or higher. The remaining strategies had at least 50% or more of the participants rating them at “4” or “5” considering them highly successful.

The chi-square analysis showed multiple strategies at the .05 level of significance or greater: a) utilizing a women’s network similar to the “good old boy” network; b) developing a strong concept; c) obtaining family support; d) learning coping skills to balance conflicting demands of career and family; e) strategically preparing for broadening district level experience; f) seeking out professional search firms; and, g) pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure. Interesting to note is the fact that 100% of the participants rated the item “obtaining a doctoral degree” with a “5” as a highly successful strategy.

Although the distribution opportunities for the variables in this section of the survey were the same as in the section on barriers, seven strategies yielded a significant difference compared to only one in the barriers’ variables. Perhaps the positive nature of the items

caused more of the participants to scores the variables higher. When I regrouped the variables in this section (Scale scores 1 and 2 together as *not successful* strategies and scale scores 4 and 5 together as *successful* strategies leaving 3 as the expected value), the change yielded the following results:

**Table 19.**  
Regrouped Chi-square Test on Strategies

Strategy	$\chi^2$	$df$	Asymp. Sig.
1 Increasing visibility in professional circles	4.571	1	*0.033
3 Formulating and adhering to a plan of action to achieve career goals	7.143	1	*0.008
6 Gaining access to community power groups	7.000	2	*0.030

*\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.*

Table 19 shows that the regrouped scale scores yielded four fewer strategies and three previously unidentified strategies at the .05 or greater level of significance compared to the original chi-square results exhibited in Table 18.

Also, in this section of the survey, one open-ended question was included asking participants to select their top three strategies they perceived to be the most successful in attaining the superintendency. Overwhelmingly, the participants believed that obtaining a doctorate and attaining the proper credentials for entry into the position were the most successful strategies. In addition, they believed that various organizational experiences and flexibility in relocating were helpful strategies. Other specific suggestions listed that were not directly included among the survey items were:

- 1) Having high school principal experience combined with district-level curriculum experience to demonstrate competency to deal with complex and difficult issues.
- 2) Broadening district-level experience beyond curriculum and instruction to include finance, facilities, and board relations.
- 3) Seeking growth opportunities.
- 4) Creating opportunities to be exposed to decision makers.
- 5) Aggressively voicing a desire to be promoted through the ranks (thereby increasing levels of responsibility).
- 6) Working in school systems with good reputations.
- 7) Having a strong male mentor to advocate and assist in preparing for the superintendency.
- 8) Providing evidence to demonstrate results in a variety of areas such as student achievement, working on a successful bond campaign, and managing a large budget.
- 9) Achieving success as a high school principal.
- 10) Having strong long-term support and encouragement from both male and female mentors.
- 11) Asking a mentor or supervisor to provide experiences in such things as budget presentations to the board and governing bodies, facilities planning with architects, serving on interview panels for administrators, and other key non-instructional duties.
- 12) Developing and adhering to a professional plan to become a superintendent.

- 13) Attending a national superintendents' conference (such as AASA's National Superintendent Academy) to receive assistance in resume writing and to get prepared by participating in mock interviews, working with professional search firms, working with the press, and increasing networking opportunities.
- 14) Having the proper credentials when opportunity presents itself.

The survey participants were specific and thorough in attributing their success to specific strategies that had worked for them. Of the items pertaining to strategies included in the survey, all 15 had 50% or more of the participants rating them at "3" or higher as highly successful strategies. The data suggested that women superintendents had strong perceptions about what strategies assisted them in achieving the executive leadership position.

*Research Question 3: Perceptions of Resilience and Perseverance Skills*

The third research question was: What are the perceptions of women superintendents about resilience and perseverance skills women may use to overcome adversity in attaining and sustaining the superintendency? In the survey, 21 items were included regarding resilience skills and perseverance skills women superintendents may employ in dealing with adversities.

The three sets of resilience skills (thinking skills, capacity-building skills, and action skills) had five survey items associated with each of them. Perseverance had six survey items. Tables 20-23 present the survey findings in frequency distributions and percentages as well as the chi-square analysis results regarding observed versus expected outcomes.

**Table 20.**

## Perceptions of Resilience Thinking Skills

	<i>Almost Never</i>		2		3		4		<i>Almost Always</i>		<i>Chi-Square Goodness of Fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
<i>When confronted with adversity, I...</i>	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
1 try to learn from others	0	0	0	0	3	21	5	36	6	43	1.000	2	0.607
2 seek differing perspectives	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	21	11	79	4.571	1	*0.033
3 expect good things	0	0	0	0	3	21	4	29	7	50	1.857	2	0.395
4 want to hear the good and bad news	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	21	11	79	4.571	1	*0.033
5 listen to my inner voice	0	0	2	14	4	29	6	43	2	14	3.143	3	0.37

\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

“Seeking differing perspectives” and “wanting to hear the good and bad news” were thinking skills that yielded a significant difference. Both of these variables had 100% of the participants rating them as customary skills.

**Table 21.**

## Perceptions of Resilience Capacity-building Skills

	<i>Almost Never</i>								<i>Almost Always</i>		<i>Chi-Square Goodness of Fit</i>		
	1		2		3		4		5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
<i>When confronted with adversity, I...</i>	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
6 have a positive influence	0	0	0	0	1	7	5	36	8	57	5.286	2	0.071
7 rely on friends, family, colleagues, and mentors	0	0	1	7	2	14	7	50	4	29	6.000	3	0.112
8 make time for exercise, hobbies, and social activities	0	0	2	14	1	7	6	43	5	36	4.857	3	0.183
9 make time to renew my spiritual self	0	0	2	14	3	21	5	36	4	29	1.429	3	0.699
10 make decisions based on personal values	0	0	0	0	3	21	5	36	6	43	1.000	2	0.607

\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

Resilience capacity-building skills had the fewest significant variables. However, “having a positive influence” yielded .071 significance with 93% of the participants rating this skill as customary.

**Table 22.**

## Perceptions of Resilience Action Skills

When confronted with adversity, I...	<i>Almost Never</i>								<i>Almost Always</i>		<i>Chi-Square Goodness of Fit</i>		
	1		2		3		4		5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
11 accept responsibility for my mistakes	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14	12	86	7.143	1	*0.008
12 move forward even though outcomes may be unclear	0	0	2	14	3	21	6	43	3	21	3.571	3	0.463
13 look to others for solutions	0	0	0	0	2	14	4	29	8	57	4.000	2	0.135
14 persevere toward goals	0	0	1	7	0	0	5	36	8	57	5.286	2	0.071
15 make decisions and stick to them	0	0	0	0	1	7	9	64	4	29	7.000	2	*0.03

\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

“Accepting responsibility for my mistakes” and “making decisions and sticking to them” yielded significant differences for resilience action skills with 100% and 93% of the participants rating these skills as customary.

**Table 23.**  
Perceptions of Perseverance Skills

When confronted with adversity, I...	<i>Almost Never</i>		2		3		4		<i>Almost Always</i>		<i>Chi-Square Goodness of Fit</i>		
	1								5		x2	df	*Asymp. Sig.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
16 overcome setbacks to conquer important challenges	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	36	9	64	1.143	1	0.285
17 do not let setbacks discourage me for long	0	0	0	0	1	7	5	36	8	57	5.286	2	0.071
18 work hard	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	100	The variable is constant. No test.		
19 finish whatever I begin	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	21	11	79	4.571	1	*0.033
20 achieve goals that take years of work	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	13	93	10.286	1	*0.001
21 am diligent	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	13	93	10.286	1	*0.001

\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

The final three perseverance skills yielded significant differences with 100% of the participants rating these skills as customary. Interesting to note, 100% of the participants rated “work hard” at the highest level of “5.”



Patterson et al. (2009) stated,

The road to leader resilience starts with the skill set of thinking. When adversity occurs, many times leaders don't have a say about the nature or intensity of adversity facing them. But they do have a choice in how they think about the conditions they face. Resilient leaders want to understand, as accurately and clearly as possible, both the bad news and the good news. They want to hear from diverse and even dissident voices so they can act from a comprehensive picture of reality. (p. 8-9)

In addition to understanding reality, resilient leaders also demonstrate a positive view about what is possible as they strive to make something good come out of a negative situation.

They demonstrate the ability to have an optimistic outlook even when facing adversity head on (Patterson et al., 2009).

The survey findings reveal that the women superintendent participants may indeed have a great capacity for resilience thinking skills. One hundred percent of the participants rated themselves as "wanting to hear the good and the bad news" and as "seeking differing perspectives" at level "4" and level "5." The chi-square analysis also revealed these two skills at significant difference levels of .05 or lower when comparing expected versus observed frequencies.

For two of the other items associated with resilience thinking skills, 100% of the participants rated themselves at level "3" and above as *Almost always* using those skills. The items were "trying to learn from others" and "expecting good things." On the last item pertaining to resilience thinking skills, "listening to my inner voice," two of the participants rated themselves on the scale at "2" while the others rated themselves at "3" or higher.

For resilience capacity-building skills, 100% of the participants rated themselves at level “3” and above as almost always “having a positive influence” and as “making decisions based on personal values.” “Having a positive influence” showed a significance level less than .05. This set of capacity-building skills rated the lowest of resilience thinking, capacity-building, and action skills. However, the scores were still fairly high with the overwhelming majority of the participants rating themselves at level “3” and above. The lowest scoring skill was “making time to renew my spiritual self.”

For the action skill set of items, the superintendents rated themselves highest in “accepting responsibility for their mistakes.” The findings showed that 100% rated this item at “4” or “5.” The chi-square analysis showed “accepting responsibility for their mistakes” and “making decisions and sticking with them” at significant levels of .05 or lower for resilience action skills.

The last items on the survey pertained to perseverance skills. This was the highest rating skill set of all the resilience and perseverance items. One hundred percent of the superintendent participants rated five of the six items at “4” or “5.” The sixth item, “I do not let setbacks discourage me for long,” still rated high with 93% of the participants giving themselves a “4” or “5” for almost always having that outlook. The chi-square test revealed significance at .05 or lower levels for “finishing whatever I begin,” “achieving goals that take years of work,” and “being diligent.” Finally, interesting to note is that 100% of the women superintendents rated themselves at level “5” for “working hard.” I observed this well documented in their resumes and vitae when reviewing their individual and collective accomplishments.

I regrouped the survey items in the resilience and perseverance skills' set as I did for the sections on barriers and strategies to see if the chi-square analysis would yield different results. Scale score results from levels "1" and "2" were grouped together as well as results from levels "4" and "5." Once again, level 3 was left alone as the expected outcome. The regrouping yielded the chi-square results in Table 24.

**Table 24.**

Regrouped Chi-square Goodness of Fit Test on Resilience and Perseverance Skills

<i>When confronted with adversity, I...</i>	<i>x<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>*Asymp. Sig.</i>
<b>Resilience Thinking Skills</b>			
1 try to learn from others	4.571	1	*0.033
3 expect good things	4.571	1	*0.033
<b>Resilience Capacity-building Skills</b>			
6 have a positive influence	10.286	1	*0.001
7 rely on friends, family, colleagues, and mentors	13.000	2	*0.002
8 make time for exercise, hobbies, and social activities	13.000	2	*0.002
9 make time to renew my spiritual self	6.1430	2	*0.046
10 make decisions based on personal values	4.5710	1	*0.033
<b>Resilience Action Skills</b>			
12 move forward even though outcomes may be unclear	6.1430	2	*0.046
13 look to others for solutions	7.1430	1	*0.008
14 persevere toward goals	10.286	1	*0.001
15 make decisions and stick to them	10.286	1	*0.001
<b>Perseverance Skills</b>			
17 do not let setbacks discourage me for long	10.286	1	*0.001

*\*Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.*

Interesting to note, when the scale scores were regrouped for the chi-square analysis on the resilience and perseverance skills, all of the capacity-building skills yielded significant results. In addition, the other variables that had at least one score in level “3” yielded significant differences. Also, four of the five resilience action skills yielded significant results. The results suggest that the participants not only speak of themselves as resilient, but also exhibit behaviors that are consistent with their beliefs by taking action as resilient leaders.

The open-ended question for this resilience and perseverance section of the questionnaire asked the participants to include any additional information they believe helped them in dealing with adverse circumstances. The responses were:

- 1) Having the desire to be engaged in something and being persistent to finish it is important.
- 2) Learning coping skills to deal with difficult professional situations is part of the job of being a leader, and being able to handle those difficulties is integral to success. This job is not for people who expect every day to go well.
- 3) Seeking the help of the community.
- 4) Having a strong sense of self and a clear set of personal/professional principles.
- 5) Keeping ethics and integrity high and never compromised.
- 6) Honesty and dependability are important.
- 7) To be an effective leader, one must be well-grounded within his or her self.
- 8) Using the support of family, friends and mentors as a motivator.
- 9) Spiritual faith is important in sustaining you during rough times.
- 10) Getting as much information as possible before making decisions.

- 11) A good leader must have a committed, creative, intelligent leadership team. You cannot survive without building trust in your team which includes smart, well-balanced and hardworking principals.
- 12) Overcoming a major health issue provides proper perspective. “It showed me that it is imperative not to be rigid, even when you are certain you are right.”
- 13) Always honoring people with dignity and respect.
- 14) Building the foundation around a shared understanding of the mission, vision, and core beliefs of the organization. It takes time to find these out, so don’t rush the process.

The findings for research question three revealed that the participants in this study believed themselves to be extremely resilient and perseverant as they rated all of the items consistently high.

#### *Research Question 4: Career Path Data*

The fourth research question was: What are the career paths of women superintendents in North Carolina? To collect data regarding career paths of women superintendents in North Carolina, at the conclusion of the survey, I asked the participants to submit their professional resumes or vitae. Six of the fourteen survey participants, or 42.9%, submitted documents. The positions they held as well as the order in which they served in those positions are documented in Table 25.

**Table 25. Career Path Data**

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Participant #1: teacher, assistant principal, principal, district director/assistant superintendent, superintendent.

Participant #2: teacher, director, principal, superintendent (out of state), principal, superintendent (out of state), superintendent.

Participant #3: teacher, curriculum specialist, district coordinator, district director, \*NCDPI executive assistant, district supervisor, assistant principal/district supervisor, district supervisor, principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent.

Participant #4: teacher/coach, teacher/department chair, \*NCDPI regional coordinator, district director, assistant superintendent, associate superintendent, superintendent.

Participant #5: teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent

Participant #6: teacher/grade level chair, district facilitator, district coordinator, assistant principal, principal, director, district specialist, assistant superintendent, associate superintendent, superintendent

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*\*North Carolina Department of Public Instruction*

Each of the participants began her educational career as a teacher. The average number of years spent in the classroom was 10.2 with five being the lowest and 13 being the highest number of years. Only one participant documented coaching as being part of her career path. All but one of the participants served as principals. Three of the six served in assistant principal positions. Two of the superintendents left district positions to work for the state department of public instruction before returning to district-level positions. All but one of the superintendents held the position of assistant or associate superintendent prior to attaining the superintendency. One participant left the state to hold two superintendent positions and a principalship prior to returning to North Carolina and being offered a superintendent position. The women held district positions relating to curriculum and instruction or student achievement. None of the participants who submitted documents held

positions that dealt specifically with finance, personnel, facilities or operations although principalships and other director positions certainly had these areas of responsibilities included in their job duties.

The resumes and vitae provide data about the varied and multi-faceted positions held by women superintendents in their career paths. All of the participants documented broad experiences that prepared them for the numerous and various duties and responsibilities of the superintendent position.

### *The Interview Data*

Selections and descriptions of the interview participants are included in this section. Also included is the section presenting the findings of prominent themes that emerged from the women's voices, individually and collectively.

### *The Interview Participants*

After the survey data collection period closed, I chose four of the volunteers for the follow-up interviews. I made careful analysis of the demographic information supplied by the survey participants in order to determine a maximum variation sampling. The determining variables were as follows:

1. Current Age
2. Marital Status
3. Number of Children in School (K-12)
4. Age of Youngest Child
5. Race/Ethnic Origin
6. Highest Degree Earned
7. Metro Status Where Employed in Current or Last Position



8. Average Daily Membership (ADM) of Current or Last District
9. Number of Years in Education
10. Currently Employed as a Superintendent
11. Hiring Method for Current or Last Position
12. Number of Superintendent Positions Held
13. Age at First Superintendency
14. Number of Years in the Superintendency

Some of the variables did not provide choices regarding participant selection. For example, all of the participants held doctorates, and all but one were white. The one survey participant identified as black, non-Hispanic, agreed to the follow-up interview but failed to include her name and contact information. Therefore, I had no way of contacting her for participation in the follow-up interviews although that was my desire. I chose two former superintendents (now retired) and two currently serving. Of the retired superintendents, one was hired from inside while in her 40s for the position in a rural low-wealth district; the other was hired from outside the district in her 50s for a position in a suburban affluent district. Both women spent five or more years in the superintendency.

Of the superintendents currently serving, one was the youngest participant in the survey listing her age as 30-39. She was in the early years of her first superintendency, married, and still had children in K-12 school. The other active superintendent was a veteran with multiple superintendencies held both in and out of the state. She was divorced, in the age range of 50-59, and had older (beyond K-12 school age) children. The four interview participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and to maintain confidentiality. The interview participants were identified as Caroline, Molly, Brenda, and Shirley for this

research. Caroline and Shirley were retired superintendents. Molly and Brenda were actively employed superintendents.

*Participant 1: Caroline.* Caroline was a retired North Carolina superintendent from an affluent district with a warm and delightful personality and a well-established professional reputation in public education. She was 60 years old or over, white, married, held a doctorate, and had over 30 years of educational experience. The age of her youngest child was 20 or over. She sought out the executive leadership position while in her 50s and was hired from outside the district to preside in a suburban setting where district enrollment was 3,000-9,999 students. Caroline spent five or more years there in her one and only superintendent position.

Caroline believed everything she did in her professional career prepared and led her to the superintendency. She felt that serving as an assistant superintendent in a large district (25,000 students) was a milestone in her career as well as a good stepping stone into the superintendent position for a smaller district (4,500 students). Caroline attributed much of her career success to her mentor, a former male superintendent. She stated that he “took her under his wing” and contacted her often to offer support in her superintendency even though he was retired at the time. As a matter of fact, she shared that he still communicates with her even now to inquire about her well being even though she is now retired and out of the role. This mentor and role model provided guidance and a listening ear for Caroline as she encountered difficulties along the way. “He has been instrumental as a role model for me and as a sounding board for me in persevering as I sought the next level in my career.”

Caroline also attributed her success to her husband, daughter, and parents. Although she did not feel free to pursue the superintendent position until after her husband retired and she had cared for her ailing mother, she contributed much of her executive success to them.

“My husband was wonderful! He learned to become a good cook, and I learned to become a good superintendent.” Her husband and daughter provided an important support base by assuring her that whatever she wished to do in her career, they would be there for her and support her. Also, Caroline attributed her tenacity and perseverance to her parents. She shared,

I will have to say that my parents, in growing up, helped me to have that attitude of pressing on. My dad would always tell me that I could do anything I wanted to do. I think that was instilled in me at an early age. I will be eternally grateful to my parents for the love and support they gave me and for pushing me to always do, in a very positive way, what I wanted to do.

When asked if she would take on the superintendency again if she could do her career over, Caroline jubilantly responded, “Absolutely! I loved my job, and I would never ever consider not doing it.”

Caroline revealed her resilience and perseverance skills as she shared difficulties that arose prior to and at the time of her executive leadership position. She felt that each of those adverse circumstances increased her resilience, stretched her, and trained her for dealing with the subsequent adversities that would arrive. Belief in herself and that she could handle difficult situations attributed to her effectiveness as a superintendent. Caroline felt this quality was essential for anyone aspiring to the position. “I believe all superintendents must possess resilience or else they won’t be in the job for very long.”

Intense fulfillment was a reward of serving in the superintendency for Caroline. “I always aspired to be the superintendent of a small unit. I found that once I got there, the

rewards of that job were very fulfilling for me.” Her parting advice for others who may aspire to the position was succinctly stated in her last remarks.

You must have a lot of energy and stamina. You have to be physically fit to be a superintendent, to be a good administrator. You have to also make sure that you make time to have balance in your life. . . .If you are not in good health and you do not have a high energy level, I think it would be very hard to be a superintendent.

For me, it was quite easy to see why Caroline was so successful in her executive position. Her kindness and encouraging words to me as an aspirant as well as the stories of her “can do” attitude certainly could be considered hallmarks of a successful leader. She exhibited enthusiasm and a profound sense of accomplishment while reflecting on her role as superintendent.

*Participant 2: Molly.* Molly was the youngest of the interview participants. She was white, married, in the age range of 30-39, and had one school-age child between the ages of 5-12. She was currently serving in the early years (five or less) in her first superintendency where she was promoted from within the district. The district was located in a town with a population of 2,500 – 9,999 residents and had an average daily membership of 3,000-9,999 students. Molly had 16-20 years of educational experience along with a doctoral degree. She was factual yet personable and demonstrated intense resilience and perseverance as she described overcoming a very serious health issue. She credited much of her resiliency and proper perspective on life to the health challenge she faced.

Molly also spoke about the significant professional experiences that helped her to attain the superintendency. At one time, she worked as a secondary principal for a male superintendent who provided an array of leadership training to help his principals become

effective leaders. The trainings included quality tools, facilitative leadership, and other managerial learning experiences. Molly felt that these professional development opportunities not only helped build her leadership capacity, but also served her well in her civic duties. She expressed that her experience as a secondary principal in a large high school in a low wealth district prepared her for the superintendency of a small district. “Every department you deal with in a small district such as child nutrition, transportation, and finance, you deal with in a large high school under the duties of the principal. I think that was a great deal of training for me.”

Molly faced multiple barriers in moving into the superintendent position. She shared the difficulties of relocating a family – trying to sell their home in a bad economy, moving her child into a new school, and helping her spouse find a job.

All of those are issues for men, but sometimes I think that it is more acceptable for a woman to stay with the children and the family in the original home location while the man goes on to another district to be the superintendent. That is not really acceptable or seen as a cultural norm when a woman takes an executive position. So, I think that is really difficult.

Molly felt that one criterion for a woman to become a superintendent was either to have a spouse that was 100% supportive or to be single, “Otherwise, I think you would be miserable in both roles.” She also attributed her credential of holding a doctorate as a successful strategy in attaining the position.

I would never have gotten this position if I had not had a doctorate, I’m sure. There have been superintendents without doctorates across the state. But because I had one, I had a bit of an edge. Pursuing the doctorate was originally a personal decision, but it

ended up having a professional benefit. I didn't really aspire to the superintendency when I began a doctorate, but as a result of the doctorate and my previous experience, I got the opportunity. So it definitely, as I said before, benefitted me. I don't think I would have gotten the opportunity without the doctorate.

Concerning her resilience and perseverance skills, Molly certainly gave credit to overcoming a serious health issue. "Obviously, struggling with (health issue) in the middle of being a principal and finishing a doctorate was definitely a struggle. However, that gave me the perspective I needed." She shared that dealing with and overcoming her health crisis helped her to realize that there was more to life than just the naysayers or the "negative stuff." She also shared that she built her perseverance by observing students who learned how to persevere. She felt that her role as an educator was to create rigorous and challenging educational experiences for students while they were still under the safety net of the K-12 school environment. If they could learn to persevere and not give up during those formative years, then certainly that skill would serve them well when they went off to college or on to other ventures in life. Her personal experience as a student contributed to this belief of which she spoke so passionately.

Molly shared that she would fill the superintendency role again if she had a chance to relive her career. However, she hesitated slightly before sharing that she sometimes wished she would have stayed in the principalship a little longer to experience the fruits of her labor. "I would work toward seeing more results of my labor and being a little bit more fulfilled in what I was working to accomplish than constantly being pushed to move on."

The final words of advice Molly offered to aspiring superintendents, whether male or female, certainly gave me something as a researcher and as an aspirant to think about. "I

would really encourage folks, don't just go after the superintendency. Go after the right place at the right time." She believed it was crucial for a superintendent candidate to interview the board just as much as the board would interview the candidate. She also stated that it was important to learn as much as possible about the political undertones in the district, the behavior of the board, and the behavior of the leadership already in place in order to determine whether the position would be a good fit for the candidate.

Molly revealed through her passionate words and frank anecdotes that she truly is a fighter and a champion. Not only did she triumph early on as a student, and later on over a serious health issue, she recently survived her early years in the superintendency while balancing the often conflicting duties of the roles of superintendent and of being a young woman, mother, and wife. She has persevered and withstood assaults on her health and her leadership abilities while exhibiting great resilience and perseverance

*Participant 3: Brenda.* The third interview participant was Brenda. She was in the age range of 50-59, white, and divorced. She had no K-12 school age children, but the age of her youngest child was 20 years old or older. She was an acting superintendent in an urban area with an average daily student membership of 10,000 to 39,999. Brenda attained her first superintendency in her 30s and had held at least three or more superintendencies during her 26-30 years of educational experience. Brenda was the most seasoned superintendent of the participants interviewed having held several superintendencies both outside and inside the state.

Brenda attributed the encouragement and support provided by others as assisting her in attaining the superintendency.

The most significant experiences would be the support and encouragement of others. When I was a teacher, “Gosh, you really should be a principal.” “You need to go back to school.” As a principal, folks were encouraging me to apply for superintendencies, even though I probably wasn’t prepared, just to have the experiences and encouraged me to go on and get a doctorate. So I guess I would say over time that the theme there would be significant people that I respected and admired believing in me, encouraging me, and supporting me along the way.

In addition, Brenda believed that having her doctorate was the needed ticket to the position. “Years ago in (another state) when I got my first superintendency, it did seem that if you tallied, there were more men without doctorates yet all of the women who were superintendents had obtained the degree. It was almost like that was the ticket needed.” Along with the credential of the doctorate, Brenda shared that a proven track record of experience was important. She said that although she believed developing a strong concept for women aspirants was important, it was not enough.

Well certainly, in any thing we do, we need to project ourselves as confident. But I don’t think it’s just a strong self concept, but having some evidence in your career of success and in the profession - whether that’s school level, or improving student achievement, or managing a significant grant or whatever that may be. There needs to be some evidence to support that strong self concept. If we feel really good about ourselves and we project ourselves well but we don’t have a platform to stand on, then I don’t think that helps us too much.

Brenda made many sacrifices to attain the superintendency. To accept her first position, she had to relocate out of the state. Although her family was supportive at the time,



her marriage later ended in divorce. Because of the time-consuming duties of the position, she felt that she was not as attentive as she could have been to her husband and the struggles he encountered as a result of moving to a new geographic location.

I do want to comment on relocation because I do not believe I would have ever gotten my first superintendency if I had not relocated. While at the time my family was willing to do that, I do believe that it was a significant factor in a later divorce. My husband was miserable in the new geography. I was away trying to make it in my first superintendency, so I wasn't very attentive to the struggles he was having in a brand new state, in a brand new community. But, I do believe that relocation is a significant factor. Sometimes people don't feel they can or if they do, there may be a significant price to pay that they're not willing to pay.

Brenda left her first superintendency to return to a principalship due to the demands of being a newly divorced single mother. She believed this was a wise move for her at the time as she was better able to care for her children and herself. This experience also enabled her to see that she could in fact do the job of superintendent and do it well. So eventually she returned to the position where she has been ever since.

Brenda attributed much of her resilience to her father. She grew up in a rural area of North Carolina where she and her siblings worked hard for their father on their farm. One summer, her father required them to work in a cotton mill where her grandfather had worked for many years. Looking back, she saw this as a strategic move on her father's part to encourage his children to get a college education. He wanted his children to have options for employment that he and his family never had. Brenda also contributed her resilience capacity to the tests and difficulties she has faced as superintendent and to the daily rigors of the job.

I also credit resiliency to those people who don't agree with you - who don't agree with the decisions you make - even those folks who are nasty and antagonistic. You learn very quickly where you can't go, that you've got to be able to have self control. You have to create for yourself that self discipline that says, 'I'm the paid professional here, and I have to be able to sit here and take this no matter how bad I don't want to.' I think the other part of resiliency is just the day to day rigors of the job. Things go wrong. People look to you. You have to be able to get out of bed every morning and enjoy what you're doing. I do not think you can be resilient if you do not like this job. I think you have to like it, and then the passion for the job does contribute to your ability to get up and go out there and put on your punching gloves if you need to from time to time. I don't think you can reach deep for what it takes to be resilient if you aren't on the other hand getting enjoyment and fulfillment from the job.

Brenda discussed her perseverance as a result of growth and maturity she gained through the years serving in the position. She initially expected quick results from her actions. However, over time, she came to see that significant change and progress takes time. She also added that she had learned perseverance by watching the students in her district persevere, especially when they came from less than desirable home circumstances.

So I guess if you're asking influence, the single greatest influence on me in terms of growing perseverance and sticking to goals is the students that I serve. If the majority of them can get up and come to school every day and try to have a good attitude about learning, then as adults, it's pretty easy for us to persevere.

Brenda's advice for other women aspiring to the superintendency was to have a proven track record and to be open and honest. "Be who you are," she suggested. "I really do believe it is important to live your life that way." Her other suggestion was for aspirants to be busy "working on the work."

I think that other premise out there for me would be that folks need to be working as much on the work and working as much on making sure our kids achieve and are successful as working on themselves. I think if you are working on the work, the job is going to come with it.

Brenda was a delightful participant to interview with a wealth of information regarding the superintendency and life principles. Her manner was warm, friendly, and honest. She was confident yet humble. Her story revealed her to be a stalwart leader. Brenda seemed wise beyond her years as she recounted her journey and shared her expertise in such a non-condescending manner.

*Participant 4: Shirley.* The final interview participant was a retired superintendent, Shirley. Shirley was 50-59 years old, white, married, and had children 20 years old or older. She was 40-49 years old when she accepted her one and only superintendent position. Her tenure as superintendent in a rural community lasted for a number of years where she presided over a district with 3,000 to 9,999 students. She was promoted from within the district and from the entry position of assistant superintendent. Shirley held a doctorate and had 30 or more years of educational experience.

Shirley attributed much of her success in attaining the superintendency to a former principal who was a woman. She learned a great deal about administration and leadership from this mentor and role model. "She prepared me for everything at the next level. So when

I became a principal, there were very few things that I had not already done.” She also credited the various positions she held during her career in shaping her for executive leadership duties. “Each one (position) prepared you for the next level.” In addition to serving in various roles and in having a woman mentor and role model, Shirley gave credit to the state and regional consultants for teaching her and assisting her in running various components of public education. “Those people were critical in making sure you knew how to do what you needed to do to get the money to your system and to get the jobs done you needed to do.”

Other strategies Shirley used to garner success were family support, obtaining the appropriate credential of the doctorate, and coming to the realization that she had a strong self concept. She stated several times how crucial the support of her husband had been. Both of their parents were older and could not help with raising the children, so her spouse had to step in and support her and the children as she carried out her superintendent duties. Shirley earned her doctorate long before going to the central office. She never intended to work in the central office, “it just sort of evolved.” She pursued her doctorate in hopes of getting a principalship, which she did. She loved the principalship and stated that it was her favorite position. However, as time went on, she was given district-level opportunities and accepted them. She used the position of assistant superintendent as an entryway into the superintendency. It was interesting how Shirley described herself when referring to having a strong self concept.

I didn’t realize that I had a strong self concept at the time I went through it, but maybe I did. I mean I knew what I felt was right. I knew what I felt was wrong, but I always also second guessed myself. I always tried to surround myself with people

who would tell me the truth – what they honestly believed. I did not want “yes” people around me.

As for barriers Shirley encountered, she mentioned three: the belief that women had to do more and be more qualified than men to be considered; the relocation of her children; and, the ties her husband had to their community in his work. She believed these issues carried weight in her decisions regarding the superintendency. However, she managed to get the superintendent position within the district where she worked and where her family was connected. She also learned to overcome the belief that women had to do more and be more qualified than men by establishing her own proven record.

Shirley believed that many educators enjoyed working for women, maybe even more than working for men. However, they seldom shared this with their boards of education. Therefore, she felt that many boards went back to hiring men after women superintendents left the position because they believed men were better leaders.

When asked if she would take on the superintendent’s role again if she were to have an opportunity to do her career over again, Shirley responded “Yes.”

However, I’d like to spend more time at the principal level. That’s really where, of all the jobs I ever had, that’s the one where I had the most fun. But yes, I would do it all over again. It’s helped me grow to be a better and stronger person. It’s helped me to realize that most people just want what is best for their school system. Different people have different styles of doing things. Some mesh with certain groups better than others do. When you are having difficulty with a group, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re the one that’s wrong. It just may mean that some of the people you

are dealing with have unrealistic expectations and don't really know what they're talking about. You just have to deal with it.

And deal with it, she did! For many years, this rather quiet and reserved woman superintendent who often times second-guessed herself or worried about whether or not she had made the best decisions had quite an impact on her district. Under her leadership, her schools improved by 20 percentage points in the number of proficient students they had as measured by the state tests. She also had several schools with titles of honor designated for their high academic performance. She was proud of their growth and the accomplishments of her students and staff.

Shirley's final remarks about the superintendency dealt with the importance of having a mentor and about the political games she refused to play.

I think the one thing that probably is extremely critical and should never be underestimated is the value of that mentor somewhere along the way. I will go back to my principal when I was an assistant principal. Her being female and seeing how she was very direct – she never played games. I never played games. But I think there are a lot of people that do play games. They're always trying to get the best on somebody so they can hold it over them and that kind of thing. I've just never found that to work. I really felt like instead of a "good old boys network," a school system could be run very close to running a business except you are not looking at an outcome – a product being produced. You're looking at the outcome as improvement for the students. You can be honest. You can be fair. You can do what's right for children. You can look after your employees, and you can follow the rules. You can hire who seems to be the best fit for a particular job. You don't have to play games. I

think that's one of the things I learned from her as a mentor and being able to know that I had another female to look at things the same way I did.

Shirley revealed herself to be a woman of integrity. Her refusal to manipulate people or the system and her perseverance for staying the course for long-term goals paid off. She and her students and staff were successful. She can enjoy her retirement with the thoughts of knowing she was true to herself, she always put the needs of students first, and that she refused to compromise her integrity. I am sure that Shirley will continue to inspire other educational leaders as she continues her retirement work in higher education.

### *Major Themes*

The themes elicited from the experiences of women superintendents reminded me of a guiding compass - a device that provides direction in relation to a specific reference point. *Purpose* was the "true north" that kept the women grounded in their work of the superintendency. *People*, *perseverance*, and *passion* were other themes or directions the data ventured, yet each of them stood in relative position to *purpose* - "true north."

The themes not only provided me as the researcher a direction for interpreting, understanding, and making meaning of the data, they also appeared to provide bearings in the lives of the women superintendents. When analyzing the data, some of the themes were more easily noticed than others, yet that did not make the less noticeable ones any less important. The themes in this study surfaced from the women's voices as an analysis of the data was conducted. A cross case analysis matrix was employed to organize and scaffold the narrative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding and chunking procedures were performed by hand and by using computer software, AnSWR. Once the analysis was complete, the

outcome revealed four major themes or compass points of: *purpose*, *perseverance*, *people* and *passion*. Table 26 provides a brief overview of the four themes.

**Table 26.** Themes Emergent from Women’s Voices

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<p><b>Purpose</b> <i>Knowing and understanding one’s mission or direction</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sense of direction</li> <li>● Sense of self</li> <li>● Moral compass</li> </ul>
<p><b>Perseverance</b> <i>Doing whatever it takes</i> <i>Staying the course</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tenacity</li> <li>● Persistence</li> <li>● Resilience</li> </ul>
<p><b>People</b> <i>Relationships in reference to others</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mentors</li> <li>● Family</li> <li>● Students</li> <li>● Others</li> </ul>
<p><b>Passion</b> <i>Focus of affection and desire that brings fulfillment</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Student achievement</li> <li>● Growth, development, and fulfillment for               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self</li> <li>- Students</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

*Purpose*

The foundational theme, or “true north,” that surfaced from the data was *purpose*. *Purpose* may be interpreted as the knowing and understanding of one’s mission, goals or professional direction. *Purpose* also includes the subthemes of sense of direction; sense of self; and moral compass. A sense of direction may be interpreted as clearly knowing and being able to articulate the direction the organization needs to go. A sense of self may include knowing and understanding one’s leadership role in moving the organization in the preferred direction, and moral compass may entail using morals and virtue to guide one’s



decisions for the betterment of the organization. The subthemes were interwoven throughout the comments the survey participants provided exemplifying *purpose*. Each of the women radiated a strong sense of *purpose*. Although a few of the participants did not specifically set out to attain the superintendency, once there they knew exactly what they were to do.

Caroline always knew she wanted to be a superintendent and shared the following:

I really think that everything I did in my professional life led up to the superintendency, especially as a female, being in the role of a principal, assistant principal, teacher – going back to that level....But, it was a goal of mine forever to be the superintendent of a small unit.

Looking back she saw how all of her professional experiences led her to the role and prepared her for the responsibility. In contrast, Shirley never aspired to the superintendency but found herself in the position.

I had my doctorate long before I ever went to the central office. I'm one of those that never intended to be at the central office. That was never my goal – to be the superintendent. I enjoyed being a principal. That was my favorite job. I got my doctorate so I would be able to become a principal. So I didn't take the path that many people take where they know that's what they want to do. Mine just sort of evolved.

However, once Shirley entered the superintendency, there was no doubt that she knew and understood her purpose.

You're looking at the outcome as improvement for the students. You can be honest. You can be fair. You can do what's right for children. You can look after your employees, and you can follow the rules. You can hire who seems to be the best fit

for a particular job....Every time the curriculum changes every five years, that's when the scores drop because the state re-norms (the test). So you're constantly working toward the goal of gradual improvement. Yes, there are a lot of things you have out there as the ultimate goal – you always want to have schools at 90% of level 3 and 4's, but that's probably not going to happen. When you get really close, they re-norm and you drop back 10 to 20%. That's why you focus on gradual improvement. But if you're in education, you have to look at those long-term goals. You have to support them and do the best you can and try to meet those goals.

Molly was another participant who initially did not have aspirations for the superintendency.

Pursuing the doctorate was originally a personal decision, but it ended up having a professional benefit. I didn't really aspire to the superintendency when I began a doctorate, but as a result of the doctorate and my previous experience, I got the opportunity. So, it definitely benefitted me.

However, just like Shirley, once Molly attained the position, she knew her purpose:

I think that perseverance to me has always been about student achievement, not just student achievement measured by a test score, but making sure our students, wherever I am, have the very best opportunities once they graduate from our school. That has driven me since I was a first-year teacher – making sure my students were competitive. Maybe that was driven by my own experiences as a student. But again, those experiences of not being pushed as hard or leaving high school and going to college and struggling a little bit have built in me a desire to want students to struggle when they are under the care of a K-12 education. When they are on their own, they will know how to deal with struggles so they can then build their own resiliency, if

that makes sense. So that's my passion. That's what I persevere for, and I'm really driven toward it - I guess because of my own experiences and what I've seen in students I have worked with over the last 16 or 17 years.

Brenda exuded a sense of purpose and revealed how her moral compass shaped her professional life as she shared her story:

Be who you are. Be honest. At the end of the day if you're doing your job as a leader, not everybody is going to like you, and people are going to say that. But they also may describe you as someone that...well, like here, I will have people say, "I didn't like that decision she made, but I always know she's about the kids." Well, that's ok with me. I can live with that. Also, folks need to be working as much on the work and working as much on making sure our kids achieve and are successful as working on themselves. I think if you are working on the work, the job is going to come with it.

Brenda's purpose was more about focusing on student achievement, enhancing the district, and maintaining virtue than on finding herself the next lucrative superintendent position. De Pree (1989) suggests that the role of a leader is to develop, express, and defend civility and values. By doing so, a leader engages her moral compass. Many times in Brenda's responses, she alluded to her sense of purpose in relationship to morality. Here she relates it to her sense of self:

In anything we do, we need to project ourselves as confident. But I don't think it's just a strong self concept, but having some evidence in your career of success and in the profession - whether that's school level, or improving student achievement, or managing a significant grant or whatever that may be. There needs to be some evidence to support that strong self concept. If we feel really good about ourselves

and we project ourselves well but we don't have a platform to stand on, then I don't think that helps us too much.

*Purpose* provided guidance for the women superintendents and kept them on course in their superintendencies. I noticed that each participant had a laser-like focus on the work they were doing or had accomplished and could articulate it well. I also observed that *purpose* provided meaning to their professional lives and may have, by its very nature, provided life itself at times in their professional worlds. *Purpose* grounded the women and provided them with a "true north" – a clear direction of where they wanted to go.

### *Perseverance*

Duckworth and her fellow researchers suggested that one personal quality that is shared by the most prominent leaders in every field is grit. They defined grit as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. (Duckworth et al., 2007)

Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon: his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (p. 1087-1088)

All of the interview participants had stories to share regarding *perseverance* including the subthemes of tenacity – the ability to holdfast, persistence – the ability to continue in spite of difficulties, and resilience – the ability to recover after setbacks. Several of the participants felt that it would be impossible to perform the role of superintendent without these traits. Shirley stated, "I don't think that you can be in education and not have perseverance." Brenda shared her thoughts on perseverance:

Yes, you must persevere. I don't know whether it's really a single individual or adults in my life who have taught me that as much as working with kids. I think particularly in my last two districts that have had significant challenges in terms of student poverty, student achievement, watching what students have to overcome really sort of helps you realize how important it is to persevere - what the stakes are if they aren't successful. When kids come to school, you know when they walk into the door of kindergarten six years behind, the work is significant, and that we don't have a choice but to persevere. So I guess if you're asking influence, the single greatest influence on me in terms of growing some perseverance and sticking to those goals is the students that I serve. If the majority of them can get up and come to school every day and try to have a good attitude about learning, then as adults, it's pretty easy for us to persevere.

Brenda attributed the growth of her perseverance to her students. What a great lesson she shared! If students could get up, come to school, work day after day and persevere year after year to get an education, then how could adults not do the same? Caroline also commented on perseverance and resilience:

You have to have perseverance. I think that every superintendent has to be resilient. I think that if you're not, you're not going to make it in that position for very long. I would not have pursued the superintendency, I guess, if I hadn't had a certain amount of tenacity. I think that all female superintendents –well, I think that all female administrators whether they are superintendents or assistant superintendents or principals have that drive and determination.

Molly battled a major health issue and used that experience to help define her growth in perseverance and resilience:

Obviously, struggling with (health issue) in the middle of being a principal and finishing a doctorate was definitely a struggle. Again, that gave me the perspective I needed. Also, it allowed me as I've been in the superintendency and had some pretty tough issues to tackle to really have some perspective and not let naysayers or the negative stuff stop me from moving in the right direction. It has given me a different perspective that this is not the only thing that is going on in the world. I think definitely that resiliency is a characteristic that I have been able to build forever in myself because of these experiences. Obviously personal, but also I think anytime you are a principal, particularly in a large school and you're trying to work on change, you have to be resilient or else you're not going to succeed with the change and you're not going to succeed with your students.

Shirley shared a message of perseverance by staying with long-term goals:

You have to stick with something. You have to have a long-term goal. That goal, of course, is to improve. I always felt like the school system did better if our (academic achievement) goal was reasonable and if they could meet it. So I tried to look at gradual improvement over time instead of huge improvement overnight.

The women superintendent participants overcame personal and professional adversities as well as stuck to their long-term goals by using their resilience and perseverance skills. They were also aware that their capacity for staying the course and handling difficult situations increased each time they encountered difficulties and as they changed roles and became more experienced over time. From Caroline:

In each of my roles, I faced difficult situations and had to make difficult decisions. I think the progress of being able to face situations at whatever level I was and to know that I could have some control over situations - that the results in the long run were not going to make or break me - helped me understand that I would be ok. It certainly defined my resilience as a superintendent. All of those roles allowed me to face situations that were difficult. They gave me the opportunities to see that I could handle them with the help of others, and that in the end. Everything was going to be ok.

### *People*

The theme of *people* or “important others” surfaced in the data. The women superintendents placed a high emphasis on their relationships with mentors and role models, family members, students, and employees. They attributed much of their success to the support these relationships provided. When asked to describe any personal or professional experiences that helped her attain the superintendency, Brenda commented,

I guess over time the most significant experiences would be the support and encouragement of others. When I was a teacher, “Gosh, you really should be a principal.” “You need to go back to school.” As a principal, folks were encouraging me to apply for superintendencies, even though I probably wasn’t prepared, just to have the experiences and encouraging me to go on and get a doctorate. So I guess I would say over time the common theme there would be significant people that I respected and admired believing in me, encouraging me, and supporting me along the way.

Caroline referenced her relationship to her mentor, a former male superintendent, as being instrumental in her success. She shared just how crucial his support was as she

I had one mentor, a male mentor, in my life who was instrumental in helping me look at, realistically, at what could be accomplished. He was a former superintendent of mine. He just kind of took me under his wing. He still calls me to this day. He called me when I went to (the superintendency in a former school district) fairly regularly just to see how I was doing even though he was retired then. He has been instrumental as a role model for me and as a sounding board for me in persevering as I sought succeeding levels in my career.

Shirley also had a close relationship with her mentor, a former woman principal, and her female colleagues:

I was an assistant principal, and I had an extremely good principal that I worked under. She happened to be a female. She prepared me for everything at the next level. So when I became a principal, there were very few things that I had not already done. There was also a group of us in (former district) at the time, and we were sort of there for each other. I think the one thing that probably is extremely critical and should never be underestimated is the value of that mentor somewhere along the way. I will go back to my principal when I was an assistant principal. Her being female and seeing how she was very direct – she never played games. I never played games.

In addition to relying on the support of their mentors, former supervisors, and colleagues, the interview participants shared how critical their relationships with their families were:



Caroline: I will have to say that my parents, in growing up, helped me to have that attitude of pressing on. My dad would always tell me that I could do anything I wanted to do. I think that was instilled in me at an early age. I will be eternally grateful to my parents for the love and support they gave me and for pushing me to always do, in a very positive way, what I wanted to do. I could not have made it had it not been for my family support. My husband was wonderful! He learned to be a good cook, and I learned to become a good superintendent. I didn't have time to fix meals. He was a wonderful support base. My daughter was wonderful in being willing to say, "Ok, Mom. Whatever it is you wish to do, I support it."

Molly: The one thing I can say is managing a family and my personal demands as a woman have been difficult, but I don't think you could do this job without a fantastic husband who is 100% supportive or you have to be single.

Brenda: I do think that having the support of your family is key, especially if people feel like they need to leave the area or if you have to relocate your children, your spouse. Obviously, if you want to stay married and if you want to make sure your kids are happy and well adjusted then that support is very important.

Shirley: The other piece that is critical for anybody that is going to be a superintendent, especially female, is that the spouse is very self-assured and does not have problems with you as the wife doing what you want to do. Also, they have to be willing to help in the rearing of your children. I had all of that. The family support is critical. If I had not had the support of my spouse, I could not have ever done it. My parents were older, and his parents were older. Basically, they were not there to help with the children. So it was just he and I. The support of the spouse is very critical.

Whether family supporters were parents, spouses, or children, one observation was clear; the participants highly valued their family relationships and family support. Deciding what was best for their family members and accepting support from their relatives played a crucial role in their career decisions.

Furthermore, each of the women spoke about their relationships with the students in their districts. Caroline placed a high emphasis on her relationship with students:

I didn't want to be the superintendent of a unit the size of (large district) because I didn't feel, number one – I would know my kids, and number two, I could get into my classrooms on a regular basis. So, I always aspired to be the superintendent of a small unit.

As mentioned earlier, Brenda had this to share about her students:

I guess if you're asking influence, the single greatest influence on me in terms of growing some perseverance and sticking to those goals is the students that I serve. If the majority of them can get up and come to school every day and try to have a good attitude about learning, then as adults it's pretty easy for us to persevere.

Shirley understood the relevance of placing highest priority on students. She revealed her important relationship with children in the following passage:

Do what is best for children – that should be your first priority. If you know you have done the right thing- that you have been upright and you have the priority of the children in your mind, then you just have to move on. Accept it and move on.

Molly placed her relationship with students at the very center of her purpose as shared below:

I don't know that there is a particular person or thing. I think that perseverance to me has always been about student achievement, not just student achievement measured

by a test score, but making sure our students, wherever I am, have the very best opportunities once they graduate from our school. That has driven me since I was a first-year teacher – making sure my students were competitive.

Shirley shared her thoughts about relationships with staff, “Do what is best for children – that should be your first priority. Then do what is best for staff – that should be your second priority.” She also talked about her relationship with the county manager:

I was fortunate enough to work with a really good county manager. He and I worked together, and we let our boards do the political. I was very straight with him, and he was very straight with me. That’s one of the relationships that is extremely important – the county manager or whoever that is. The superintendent must be able to trust them and to work with them. I had a really good one, and he was a male. He operated very much like I did.

*People*, meaning the relationships with others, were very important to the survey participants. Each superintendent placed a high emphasis on sustaining and growing relationships and on using those relationships to influence their professional decisions.

### *Passion*

*Passion* was the final theme that was interwoven throughout the data. The interview participants shared their passions for student achievement as well as for their own growth, development, and fulfillment as the foci of their professional affection, time, and effort. Passion was also seen as the source that fueled their purposes, gave strength to them in their relationships with people, and gave them strength in persevering rough terrains. Shirley commented that her work in the superintendency had “helped me grow to be a better and stronger person.” Molly shared the following:

Those experiences are maybe not being pushed as hard or leaving high school and going to college and struggling a little bit, that has built in me a desire to want students to struggle when they are under the care of a K-12 education so that when they are on their own, they know how to deal with it so they can build their own resiliency, if that makes sense. So that's my passion. That's what I persevere for, and I'm really driven toward it - I guess because of my own experiences and what I've seen in students I have worked with over the last 16 or 17 years.

Caroline shared her passionate thoughts about the fulfillment from the job:

I always aspired to be the superintendent of a small unit. I have found that once I got there, the rewards of that job were fulfilling for me. I loved my job, and I would never ever consider not doing it.

Brenda related passion, purpose, resilience and perseverance:

Things go wrong. People look to you. You have to be able to get out of bed every morning and enjoy what you're doing. I do not think you can be resilient if you do not like this job. I think you have to like it then the passion for the job does sort of contribute to your ability to get up and go out there and put on your punching gloves if you need to from time to time. I don't think you can reach deep for what it takes to be resilient if you aren't on the other hand getting enjoyment and fulfillment from the job.

The themes of *purpose*, *perseverance*, *people*, and *passion* were interwoven throughout the stories the women told. The women superintendents' voices individually and collectively spoke of their strengths, motivations, successes, and disappointments. The road to and within the superintendent position must have seemed at times like a long slow trek

into a deep abyss instead of a Sunday afternoon joyride, yet these courageous women pressed on. After having the opportunity to interview them, I concluded that it must have been their visions of mountaintops that kept them steadfast and on the right path.

These women had a keen sense of self – they knew who they were. They had a clear appreciation for the significant others in their lives, and they were willing to persevere through difficulties and trials for the sake of their passion of helping students. These women knew where they must go – they understood “true north.”

#### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter reported the findings of this study. The data were gathered from surveys, follow-up interviews, and superintendent participants’ resumes and vitae. The data, descriptive statistics, and analytic outcomes regarding prevailing barriers, successful strategies, and career pathways were organized and displayed in tables and narrative throughout this chapter.

The following chapter discusses these findings in light of the literature on women superintendents.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study focused on women school superintendents in North Carolina regarding their perceptions of barriers they may have encountered in attaining the superintendency, successful strategies they may have used to navigate those barriers, and resilience and perseverance skills they may have relied on to help them overcome barriers and other adverse circumstances. The study also explored the career paths of these women superintendents to provide information regarding pathways that may lead to the superintendency. This chapter uses the findings to draw conclusions, to discuss implications, and to suggest possible future lines of inquiry.

### *Typical Superintendent Profile*

The typical profile of current women superintendents in North Carolina was discussed in Chapter 4. But, how does she compare to the typical American superintendent? The typical American public school superintendent is a married, white male of 52.5 years old who was appointed to the position by a school board rather than elected by the public. He has served an average of 8.75 years in the superintendency in only one or two positions. His average tenure in a single superintendency is between five and six years. Not only was he mentored; he currently mentors others, both men and women who aspire to administration or the superintendency. His background includes five to seven years of teaching in secondary schools where he also obtained his first administrative experience. He does not hold a doctoral degree, but holds a specialist degree. When seeking the superintendency, he was

able to obtain his first superintendent position in a year or less and was most likely hired from outside the district (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

The typical American superintendent occupies 82% to 87% of the superintendent positions in the country. Women, like the participants in this study, hold only a fraction of those positions, 13% to 18%. The findings of this research invoke the question, “What do we know now that might influence helping more women attain the superintendency?”

### *Barriers*

A barrier can be a hurdle to navigate or a barricade signifying a dead end. It was apparent that the women superintendents who participated in this research viewed barriers as mere detour signs - temporary obstructions seen as opportunities for growth and development. The participants ranked the following as major barriers: a) conflict of career and family demands; b) lack of ability to relocate as a result of personal commitment; c) exclusion from the informal socialization process of the “good old boys” network; and d) the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men. The regrouped chi-square analysis yielded conflict of career and family demands and lack of ability to relocate as statistically significant barriers.

All of the women who participated in the follow-up interviews shared stories regarding the conflicting demands of career and family. One of the superintendents felt she was not free to pursue the superintendency until her husband retired and could relocate, her daughter was grown and on her own, and until her ailing mother whom she cared for had passed away. I cannot help but think, “Would a man have to make those same personal considerations before pursuing or accepting the superintendency?” This does illustrate a cultural difference that reflects the Woman’s Place model. Another superintendent’s

marriage ended in divorce due to the conflict of demands between work and home. In contrast, two other interview participants attributed part of their success in attaining the position to their supportive husbands. They had spouses who relocated to follow their wives and also stepped in to fill what is often viewed as the woman's role in caring for the home and raising the children.

This barrier was identified as a self-imposed barrier in Derrington and Sharratt's recent study on women superintendents (2009). It was also identified 35 years ago in Estler's research (1975) as she described the Woman's Place model. This model spoke of the emphasis of society's expectation that the proper place for a woman was in the home to care for her children and her husband. Other researchers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 1996; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989) have documented conflict of career and family demands as a major barrier for women who aspire to and who have attained the superintendency. The participants in the study agreed as 64% rated this barrier the highest.

The second barrier identified in this research was the lack of ability to relocate as a result of personal commitment. Again, 64% of the participants rated this as a major barrier. One of the interview participants expanded on this stating that it was particularly difficult to relocate her family yet manage the long-distance marketing and sale of a previous homestead. In situations where men relocated, women are often left behind to handle the household affairs. But when the woman relocates, the family usually goes with her. This superintendent also faced a life-threatening illness prior to her relocation for the superintendency. She had great inner strength as well as phenomenal spousal support to make this kind of move. This barrier was also identified 35 years ago in Estler's Woman's Place model. It is interesting to note that although so much has changed in a generation, some



things – mainly certain attitudes and beliefs- appear to have not changed for many people. Although there are no laws that state a woman must be the primary care-taker of the home and primary nurturer for the children, this sense of responsibility often goes unspoken and unchallenged.

Another superintendent in the study talked about what she eventually lost in order to relocate for a superintendent's position – her marriage. Relocation to the superintendency came at a hefty price for this superintendent. These findings align with those from other studies conducted in California (Wickham, 2008) and Virginia (Lee, 2000). The job of the superintendent has often been described as migrant work, and the inability to relocate continues to be a formidable barrier, potentially more so for women than for men (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Responses from current North Carolina women superintendents in this study support the literature as they identified lack of ability to relocate due to personal commitment as the second major barrier.

The third significant barrier revealed in the findings was exclusion from the informal socialization process of the “good old boys” network. Half of the survey participants saw this constraint as a major barrier for them. One participant in the research provided this information on the survey, “My opinion is the biggest barrier to success (not necessarily securing the position, but maintaining it) is the ‘good old boys’ network. The good old boys don't like CHANGE.” Some researchers (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999) found that breaking into the “good old boys” network was a positive factor in acquiring the superintendency. Therefore, the reverse may suggest that it is indeed a challenging constraint. This barrier also aligns with the Discrimination model (Estler, 1975) which drew upon the assumption that institutional patterns were the result of

the efforts of one group to exclude participation of another. In the “good old boys” network men helped men not women achieve upper level positions, although the data in this study suggest that both male and female mentors were considered as instrumental in attaining the superintendency.

Although 50% of the women rated the “good old boys” network as a major barrier, other participants felt just the opposite. One stated, “I experienced no barriers. In fact, my mentor was a male under whom I served as a teacher, principal and assistant superintendent.” The “good old boys” network still exists, but some women have managed access. Although it is unlikely that they have been granted full-privileged membership, through association with powerful males, they have been granted “guest” access. Their conditional access is reliant upon endorsement by a male member of the network.

The last barrier, the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men, had 50% of the participants rating it as a major barrier. The participants in this study were qualified for the position as 100% held doctorate degrees, and each of them held various administrative positions (for example: assistant principal, principal, central office director, assistant superintendent) prior to entering the superintendency.

Hansot and Tyack (1981) in their review of research from 1974-1981 provided an explanatory model that focused on the individual woman as possessing internal barriers that kept her from advancing. Socialization and gender stereotyping, which were preconceived social constructs identifying what women and men were like and how they should behave, were seen as the guiding forces behind women’s behavior. This perspective essentially made the woman responsible for her lack of achievement in school leadership. To remedy the situation, they found that many people believed women needed to be re-socialized so that

they would fit into a man's world. Moreover, they believed women had to do a "man's job" better than a man to get even a modest amount of professional respect and recognition.

The belief that women must be better qualified than men relates to the Meritocracy model that Estler described (1975). Based on the findings in this study, it is not the case that women do not have merit or qualifications to hold the position. These participants certainly had proven track records in administrative experience, educational degrees attained, and in high student achievement in their districts. Other studies have documented the same (Lee, 2000; Wickham, 2008). However, the perception from others that women must be better qualified than men may suggest that women are less by nature.

The women superintendents in this study acknowledged that barriers do in fact exist for women who aspire to and attain the position of superintendent. Those barriers were identified as conflict of family and profession, relocation, and overcoming negative perceptions about women's qualifications. However, the barriers were not impenetrable for the women superintendents participating in this study. The traditional metaphor of the glass ceiling suggests that barriers prevent entrance into the highest levels of leadership in an organization (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Yet that is not necessarily the case. The women participants did encounter barriers but were able to navigate successfully into the executive leadership position of school superintendent. Therefore, the metaphor of the labyrinth may be more appropriate than the glass ceiling for explaining the circuitous paths that women travel on the way to the center of the labyrinth which may represent the position of superintendent. The findings of this study are important as they reveal pathways of possibilities and provide evidence that the metaphor explaining women's routes to executive leadership should be changed from the glass ceiling to the labyrinth. When metaphors

change, so do mindsets and attitudes. Instead of viewing the route to the superintendency as one riddled with massive barriers leading to an impenetrable glass ceiling where women are prevented from entering the sanctuary of executive leadership, this study suggests that obstacles can be navigated. By understanding and planning for possible constraints, women who aspire to the superintendency may strategize their way into the position. Although the women superintendents in this study faced barriers, they were resourceful in using strategies and relationships to help them maneuver around the obstacles. The successful strategies identified are discussed in the next section.

### *Successful Strategies*

The strategies that were rated the highest among the women superintendent participants were: a) obtaining a doctoral degree; b) developing a strong self concept; c) obtaining family support; d) learning coping skills to balance conflicting demands of career and family; e) strategically preparing for broadening district level experience; f) increasing flexibility to relocate; and, g) pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure. These strategies had 100% of the participants rating them as highly successful at level “4” or level “5.”

Three of the highly-ranked successful strategies related directly to the major barriers identified in the preceding section. They were: developing a strong self concept; learning coping skills to balance conflicting demands of career and family; and, increasing flexibility to relocate. The first two strategies were identified in the literature as being successful by Derrington and Sharratt (2009). They suggested that women superintendents and those who aspire should cultivate resolve and an iron will; balance their personal and professional lives; negotiate boundaries and seek creative alternatives; and decide on ways to lighten the

“double day” work load between work and home. Each of these strategies was offered as a possible solution to overcome barriers women faced.

The other highly-rated strategies of obtaining a doctoral degree, strategically preparing for broadening district level experience, and pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure were identified by Grogan (1996) in the literature. In her study of 27 aspirants to the superintendency, she identified strategies for success. Candidates should prepare for the position in two different ways: (1) to have a high level of formal training, including at least eligibility for, if not completion of, state superintendent certification and a university degree beyond the bachelor's, and (2) to have credible prior experience on the job as an administrator capable of handling a superintendency, if not actual experience as a superintendent. All of the participants in this study held doctoral degrees, and all of the survey participants rated “obtaining a doctoral degree” at the highest level as a highly successful strategy. One interview participant succinctly state what many of the other participants believed, “I don't think I would have gotten the opportunity without the doctorate.” For 8 of the 14 survey participants, when asked about their top three strategies that helped them attain the superintendency, obtaining the doctoral degree was listed first or second. One interview participant went so far as to say that the doctorate is the ticket required for entry into the position.

Other responses to the top three strategies questions on the survey included strategies that focused on advancing within the organization and strategies that focused on obtaining experience in many different roles of leadership within the district. The interview participants attributed their success to having multiple experiences as administrators. “I think basically it was going through the various administrative jobs. Each one prepared you for the next level.”

The interview responses triangulated the data obtained via the survey. The data obtained through the resumes and vitae also revealed that the women superintendents took advantage of advancement opportunities within their districts. Two of the interview participants did not originally seek the superintendent position, but because they had the experience and credentials, they were encouraged to apply and were offered the job.

An interesting finding amidst the data on strategies revealed that 57% of the participants thought it very helpful to enlist the support of a male mentor or sponsor while 50% of the participants thought it helpful to enlist the support of a female mentor or sponsor. All of the interview participants spoke about their mentors. These findings are supported in the literature. Hill and Ragland (1995) found that mentoring increased a woman's career opportunities and development of political savvy. They also found that some women did not have time to recognize the value of the mentoring role in the scope of their careers, but the study concluded that women must search for mentors and use them in positive ways if they hoped to advance their careers. The participants in this study certainly did that.

It is true that women superintendents encountered temporary detours along their paths to the superintendency, but they also employed successful strategies based in the literature that helped them secure the position. The findings from this study suggest that the participants strategically maneuvered their way through the labyrinth. But what if an initial strategy they selected did not work? Obviously they chose another one and pressed on! The data on resilience and perseverance skills collected in this study reveal that and more.

### *Resilience and Perseverance Skills*

Patterson, Goens, and Reed (2009) describe leadership resilience the following way: Even in the toughest of times, educational leaders consistently demonstrate the ability to recover, learn from, and developmentally mature when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity...Resilience is not an all-or-nothing, fixed characteristic. Resilience is a relative concept. ...some leaders are *relatively* more resilient than others. Resilience is also cyclical. (pp. 3-4).

Figure 2 shows the resilience cycle as portrayed by Patterson et al. (2009).

# The Resilience Cycle

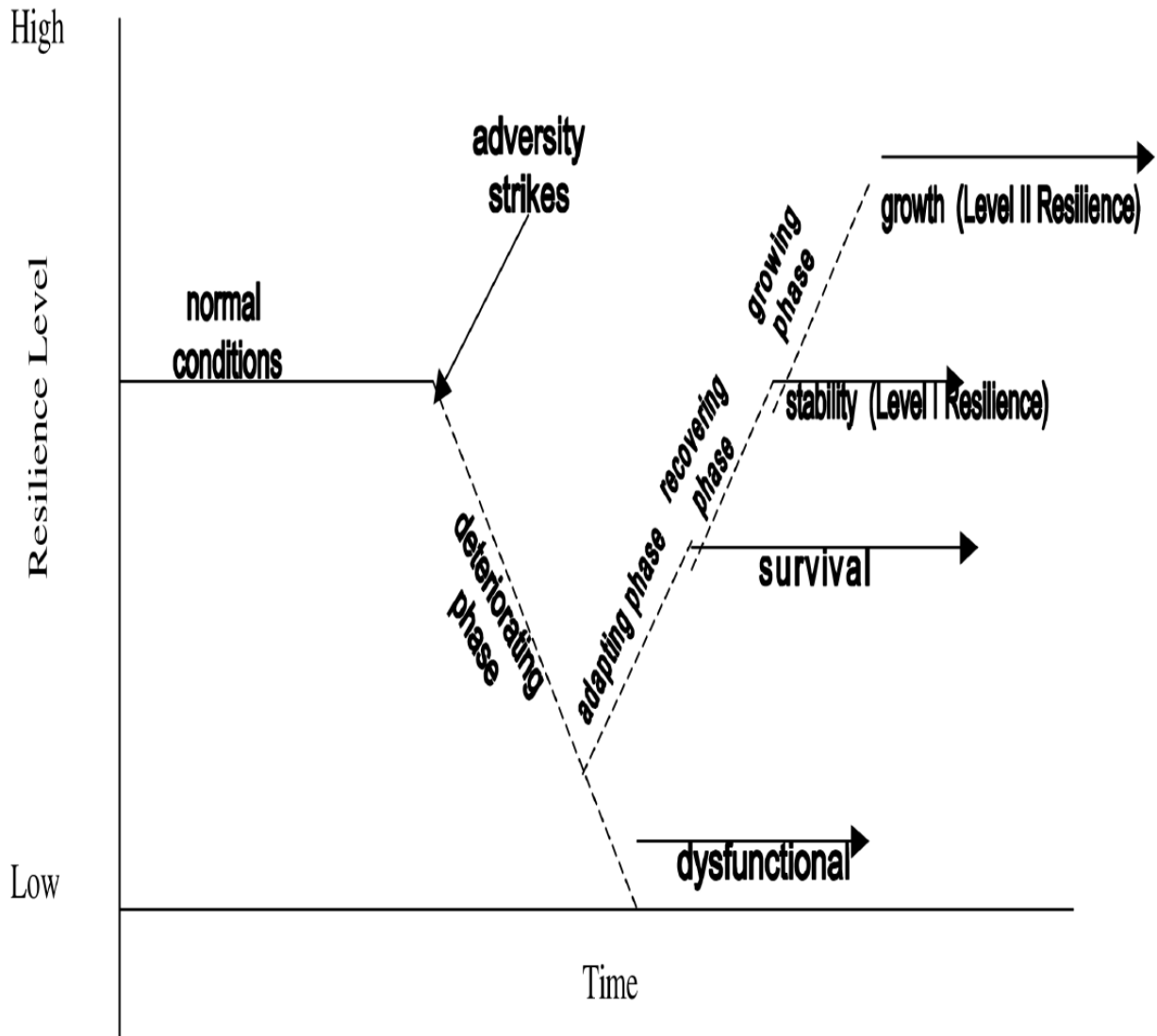


Figure 2. The resilience model.



The resilience cycle begins with a phase known as *normal conditions* or homeostasis. During this phase life is moving along steadily, and there are no major disruptions or difficulties. Suddenly, an adverse situation may appear and conditions have the potential to deteriorate quickly, throwing the leader into phase two, the *deteriorating* phase of the resilience cycle. During this phase, leaders may blame others or degrade themselves. If the leader fails to reverse this negative or downward spiral of behaviors, they can find themselves moving towards dysfunctionality. However, if leaders do reverse attitudes and behaviors towards a more positive set of responses, they can find themselves moving into phase three, the *adapting* phase, (Patterson et.al, 2009, p. 6).

Continuing an upward trajectory, the *adapting* phase gives way to the *recovering phase*, a path back to the level of stability experienced before the arrival of the adversity. Patterson et al. (2009) refer to this status quo point as Level I resilience. If leaders top out at the status quo level, they may continue to function adequately, but they don't experience growth from the many lessons learned from the adversity. The researchers found that truly resilient leaders don't settle for status quo Level I resilience. They enter the *growing phase* and move on to Level II, strengthened resilience. Patterson et al. (2009) identified three resilience skill sets: resilience thinking skills; resilience capacity-building skills; and resilience action skills.

The data from this study reveal that the participants were Level II resilient leaders. Their ratings on resilience thinking skills and resilience action skills were very high. Although the ratings on resilience capacity-building skills were lower than the other two skill sets, they were still quite high. The chi-square analysis yielded significant differences with the following resilience skills: a) seeking differing perspectives; b) wanting to hear the good

and bad news; c) having a positive influence; d) accepting responsibility for my mistakes; and, e) making decisions and sticking to them. The following perseverance variables proved significant differences in the chi-square analysis: a) finishing whatever I begin, b) achieving goals that take years of work; and, c) being diligent.

Resilience thinking skills' items on the survey measured what the participants thought about adverse situations. Patterson et al. (2009) stated that adverse situations are certain to come, but what separates the highly resilient leaders from others is the way in which they think about the adversity. How do they make sense out of the current reality? How do they interpret future possibilities? Do they remain realistically optimistic? The data associated with resilience thinking skills revealed that 100% of the participants "wanted to hear the bad news along with the good news" and "sought out differing perspectives." The participants also rated themselves high in "expecting good things" and "trying to learn from others". The lowest-rated thinking skill was "listening to my inner voice." The women superintendents tended to consider various views of others, often opposing views, instead of listening only to their intuition.

The participants also rated themselves high in resilience action skills. From the data, their actions appeared to align with their thoughts. The actions skills that were rated highest were "accepting responsibility for my actions and mistakes" and "making decisions and sticking to them." Patterson et al. (2009), as found in the literature, referred to this skill set as:

...the litmus test of a leader's ability to recover, learn from, and developmentally mature in the face of adversity. Every leader can think they are resilient and talk a good talk about their capacity to be resilient, but highly resilient leaders 'walk the

talk'. They act on the courage of their convictions, especially during difficult times (p. 10).

The participants did just that as evidenced by 90% or more of them rating themselves very high on all but one of the action skills.

The last resilience skill set, resilience capacity-building, contained items that still ranked high. However, they were not as high as the thinking and acting skills sets. The highest rated variable was "having a positive influence." The women leaders, 93% of them, demonstrated their belief in self by rating this skill very high.

Patterson et al. (2009), suggested in the literature that one should think of the resilience capacity-building skills as the fuel tank that supplies the necessary energy to produce resilient actions. The researchers also suggested that resilience capacity was partially defined by a leader's accumulated experiences. As leaders grew stronger by successfully confronting adversity, they expanded their capacity and increased their fuel reserves for successfully weathing future storms. This makes sense in light of the findings uncovered in this study. The lowest-rated resilience capacity-building skill was "making time to renew my spiritual self." However, that skill still had 9 of the 14 participants rating it on the upper end. I wondered, "Did they not feel a need to make time to renew their spiritual selves? Or did they not have TIME to renew their spiritual selves?" Resilience and perseverance seemed to go hand-in-hand.

The participants indicated a strong sense of perseverance as indicated by the perseverance scale. Five of the six items had 100% of the participants rating the variables as behaviors they "almost always" demonstrated. The sixth and lowest scoring perseverance item, "I do not let setbacks discourage me for long" still had 93% of the participants rating it

high. One of the women superintendents commented on her perseverance, “Certainly perseverance and passion for wanting to do what is right and best, I think, has led my goal-seeking opportunities and actually, my challenges.” Another participant said, “I don’t think that you can be in education and not have perseverance.” It should be no surprise to any of the readers that the highest-ranking perseverance variable received 100% of the participants rating themselves highest in, “I work hard.” If resilience can be described as “I can” and perseverance can be described as “I will,” then each of the women superintendents participating in this study may be described as “I did!”

The findings in this study suggest that building resilience and perseverance capacity is essential for those women who aspire to and achieve the superintendent position. Perhaps more importantly, it is imperative to view adversity as an opportunity for growth and development and as an opportunity to become prepared for other difficulties that may lie ahead.

### *Career Paths*

Findings from the data collected from resumes, vitae, and open-ended responses align to Kim and Brunner’s career path findings (2009) identified in the literature. The researchers found that men experienced greater success achieving the superintendency by following a vertical pathway, but women most often arrived at the superintendency by following a diagonal and often horizontal path. Kim and Brunner identified the following path as most common for women: elementary or secondary teacher, club advisor, elementary principal, director/coordinator, assistant/associate superintendent, superintendent. The most common path for men was: secondary teacher, athletic coach, assistant secondary principal, secondary principal, superintendent (2009). For the participants in this study, their career moves took

them on many alternate routes, even backward in nature at times, but eventually into the top executive position.

Each of the participants in this study began her educational career as a teacher. The average number of years spent in the classroom was 10.2 with five being the lowest and 13 being the highest number of years. Kim and Brunner (2009) found the women in their study usually stayed in the classroom 9.8 years, and men averaged 7.3 years in the classroom. Only one participant in this study documented coaching as being part of her career path, but Kim and Brunner (2009) found it common for men as 64% of them held coaching positions compared to only 14% of the women in their study.

All but one of the participants in this study served as principals. All of them served in elementary or middle schools. None served in secondary schools. Kim and Brunner (2009) found that 35% of the women in their study had secondary principalships experience while 65% of the men held secondary principalships.

Three of the six participants in this study served in assistant principal positions. Two of the superintendents left district positions to work for the state department of public instruction before returning to district-level positions. All but one of the superintendents held the position of assistant or associate superintendent prior to attaining the superintendency. Kim and Brunner found that 56% of women entered the superintendency from the assistant or associate superintendent position, but only 34% of men did the same (2009). The highest number of participants in this study ( $n=7$ ) entered the superintendency when they were in the age range of 40-49. The second highest age group was 50-59 ( $n=5$ ). Kim and Brunner (2009) found the average age to be 53.1 for women and between 52 and 53 for men.

One participant in this study left the state to hold two superintendent positions and a principalship prior to returning to North Carolina and being offered a superintendent position. All of the participants held district positions relating to curriculum and instruction or student achievement. None of the participants who submitted documents held positions that dealt specifically with finance, personnel, facilities or operations although principalships and other director positions certainly had these areas of responsibilities included in their job duties. Kim and Brunner (2009) found that most men held positions relating to secondary schooling while the women in their study held positions relating to instruction prior to entering the superintendency.

Only one participant had a path that could be considered vertical: teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent. According to Kim and Brunner (2009), there is no documentation that a vertical path offers a better candidate for the superintendent position. On the contrary, they suggested the varied experiences that the horizontal or diagonal path provides may be an added bonus by giving the candidate greater experiences. The findings from this study support the career path findings found in the literature by Kim and Brunner (2009).

### *Themes*

Four themes emerged from the women's voices, individually and collectively, as I analyzed the narrative data from the interviews. They were *purpose*, *perseverance*, *people*, and *passion*. The women superintendents' stories were living accounts of their unique and individual experiences that documented their triumphs as well as their trials. Belenky et al. (1986) posited the following:

What follows a woman's discovery of personal authority and truth is, of course, a blend of her own unique life circumstances and attributes. But as we listened to many stories, we began to hear how a newly acquired subjectivism led the woman into a new world, which she insisted on shaping and directing on her own. As a result, her relationships and self-concept began to change" (p.76).

As I listened and began to truly "hear" the participants' stories, I sensed the same about them – they were not victims. Instead, they were powerful women who insisted on shaping and directing their own worlds. Their journeys were amazing and offered profound implications for others. In the following section, the identified themes have been connected to the research questions, the lens of this study, and to the literature.

The theme of *purpose* was central to the findings from the interview data. I defined *purpose* as knowing and understanding one's own mission and direction. The interwoven subthemes included sense of direction, sense of self, and moral compass. Each participant revealed through her story that she had a strong concept of self and knew what her overarching direction in the role of superintendent must be. Subsequently, she allowed her moral compass to show her the way. "I knew what I felt was right. I knew what I felt was wrong. You can be honest. You can be fair. You can do what's right for children."

The discovery of the theme of *purpose* amidst the data adds to the findings of research question four concerning the career paths of women superintendents in this study. Two of the participants sought out the position of superintendency. They had a very clear sense of direction with their gaze fixed on the ultimate destination - securing the top seat. Even though two of the participants did not originally aspire to the position, once there, their purpose became clear. Grogan (1996) found for the most part, women leaders shared a

fundamental concern for the welfare of children. This concern not only drove the women in her study into educational administration but kept them there as well. In this study, I found the focus of the theme of *purpose* to be a deeply committed fundamental concern for the welfare of children. This focus gave meaning to *purpose*, and then *purpose* provided guidance in everything else the superintendent participants in this study did in their roles as executive leaders.

The next theme that surfaced was *perseverance*. This theme was relevant to the findings on barriers, strategies, and resilience and perseverance skills as stated in research questions one, two, and three. I defined this theme as doing whatever it takes, staying the course. Interwoven were the subthemes of resilience, tenacity, and persistence. Not only did the participants in this study rate themselves very high on using perseverance skills to withstand adversity and to stay the course guided to their long-term goals, but the anecdotes provided in the interviews also showed the participants to be highly perseverant. Each participant identified crises as well as regular day-to-day duties of the position that required *perseverance*.

As Duckworth et al. (2007) observed, the one quality that distinguished star performers in their fields was perseverance. They found that individuals with a great capacity for perseverance attained higher levels of education than less gritty or persevering individuals of the same age. The survey participants revealed this to be true as all of them had obtained the doctoral degree. In addition, the researchers found that individuals who placed an emphasis on long-term stamina rather than short-term intensity held extremely high levels of perseverance. Several of the participants spoke of long-term goals and staying the course even though results were not immediate.



The next theme to surface from the data was *people*, relationships. Many of the participants in the survey and in the interviews spoke of the roles their mentors, colleagues, families, and students played in attributing to their success in attaining and maintaining the superintendency as well as the roles they played in defining their purpose. Family support and encouragement and guidance from mentors were identified as successful strategies in attaining the superintendency. Identified in the literature, Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) found women leaders employed transformational leadership through webs of inclusion and nurturing. Grogan (1996) found participants in her study to highly value their activities of care and emotional connection with the members of the organization. An interview participant shared, “Do what is best for children – that should be your first priority. Then do what is best for staff – that should be your second priority.” Certainly the relationships the participants in this study had with others influenced their perceptions regarding barriers, strategies, resilience and perseverance, and their career paths.

The final theme to emerge from the data was *passion*. I defined passion for purposes of this study as focus of affection and desire that brings fulfillment. All of the women spoke passionately as they gave voice to the experiences in their lives. They were very clear in revealing the focus of their *passion* in their work as being the achievement and welfare of their students. Participants spoke of their personal and professional growth by fulfilling their passions in the role of superintendent.

In the literature, Whatley (1998) interviewed 12 gifted women about their career choices within education and concluded that their intense self-reflection enabled the women “to transform pain into growth and achieve fulfillment in personal and professional domains”

(p.4). Even through the difficult and complex journeys that led to the superintendency, the women participants in this study experienced just that.

The findings from this study reveal that the women participants used the themes to get where they wanted to go. These women superintendents transformed barriers or adversities they encountered into temporary surmountable impediments in order to achieve their goals. They relied on relationships with others and kept a vigilant focus on their purpose while finding fulfillment and satisfaction in pursuing their passion. Each of the interview participants agreed that if given the chance to do it all again, they would.

### *The Conceptual Model*

The original conceptual framework model was displayed in Figure 1 and is included again here for easy reference. I created it as a visual representation of the articulated conceptual framework included in Chapter 1. The figure represented the journey of women who aspired to the superintendency in North Carolina. The journey was viewed using a theoretical lens of women's ways of knowing and leading. The model showed that as women moved upward in their pursuit of the superintendency, they encountered barriers, implemented successful strategies, and then continued to move forward until they attained the superintendency. On the left side of the figure was an upward arrow that suggested women moved up in the hierarchy by advancing through the ranks of administration. Included on the right side of the model was an upward arrow representing the growth and development of resilience and perseverance skills that occurred during the climb to the superintendency.

# Women Superintendents in North Carolina

As Viewed through a WWK/L\* Theoretical Lens

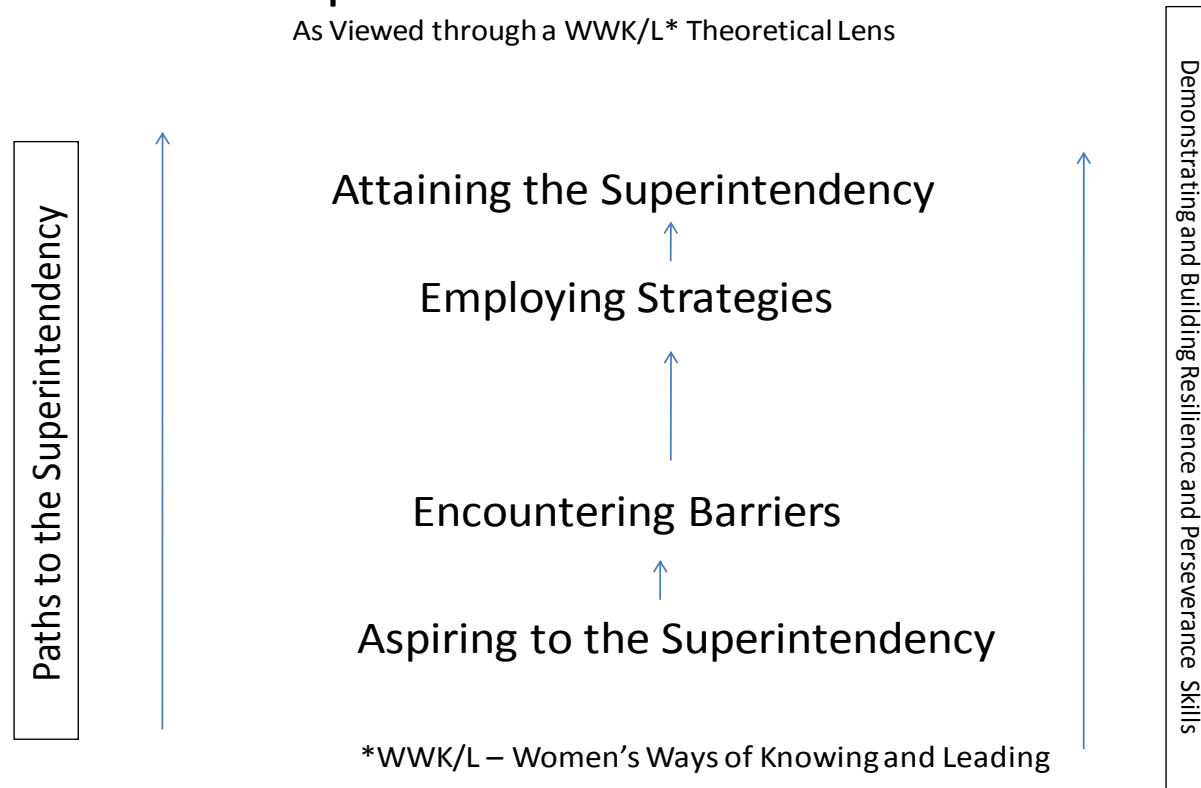


Figure 1. The conceptual framework model.

The findings revealed that not all of the women superintendents in North Carolina initially aspired to the position. Some women who did not have aspirations for the job wound up there as a result of having the proper credentials and quite a few levels of administrative experience. Therefore an adjustment in the model was made to include those women. The findings also revealed that women do not encounter just one barrier and execute just one strategy and then make it into the position. The cycle involves encountering many barriers along the way and employing strategies each time an obstacle is met. Also, when women attained the superintendency, they continued to incorporate successful strategies for maintaining their position; hence, a change in the directional arrows between the women candidates, barriers, strategies, and the attainment of the position. The revised model is shown in Figure 4.

# Women Superintendents in North Carolina

As Viewed through a WWK/L\* Theoretical Lens

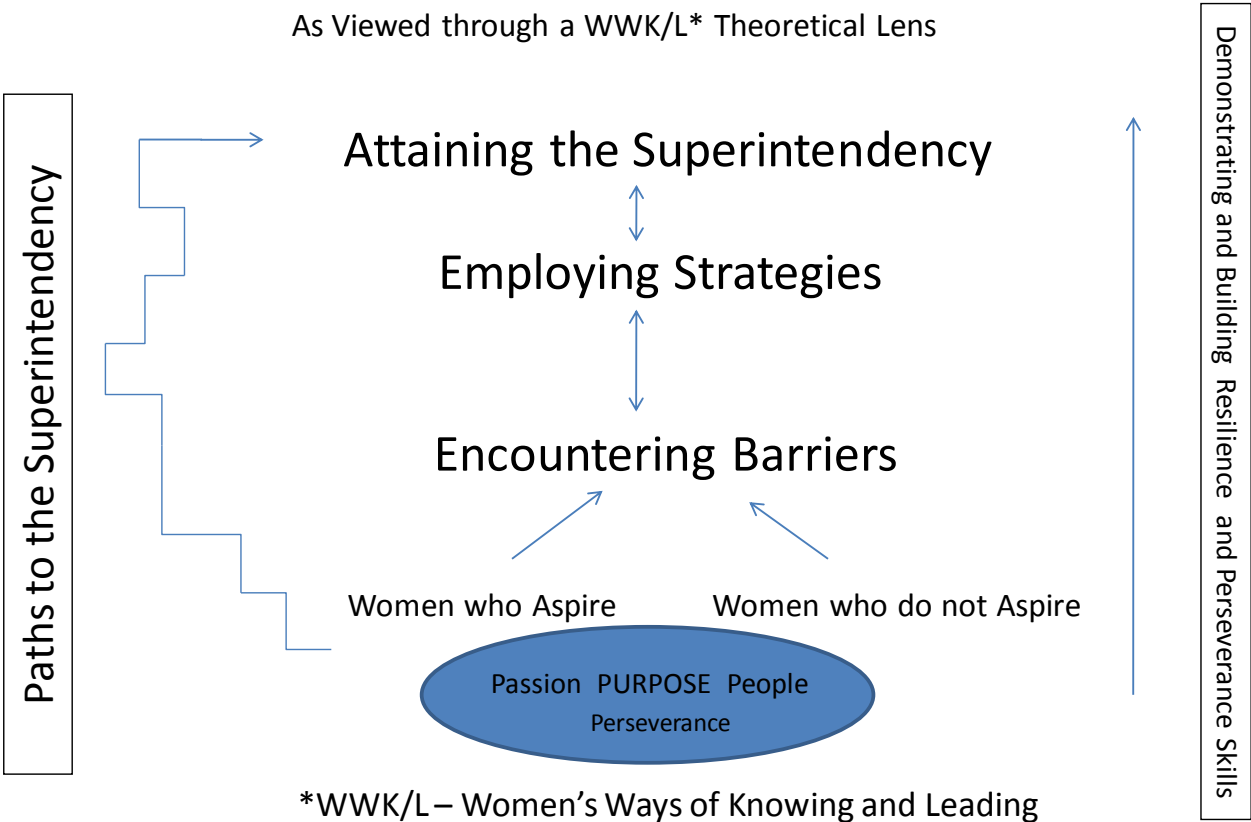


Figure 3. The labyrinth model of women’s paths to the superintendency.

The findings of this study aligned with the literature regarding career paths. Typical paths of women to the superintendency were not vertical. They were horizontal, diagonal, and at times, went in reverse; thus, a change in the arrow along the left side of the model portraying the career path. The directional arrow showing development and growth in resilience and perseverance skills remained the same as the findings documented that the participants perceived high levels of resilience and perseverance and attributed the growth of those attributes to constraints and opportunities along their journeys. The final adjustment to the model was adding the themes from the findings as the foundational guideposts for the women candidates. The text for purpose was made larger to signify that it provided overarching direction affecting the other themes.

Traditionally, the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” was used to signify a barrier – a roadblock – that prevented entrance into high level positions for women (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Many believed that a woman was able to rise steadily within a business or organization until she landed into the entry position just prior to the final and highest position, the chief executive officer. However, based on the findings in this study, I believe the metaphor is now ready to be updated.

As Eagly and Carli (2009) suggest the “glass ceiling” could be misleading in characterizing the problems women leaders encounter. The metaphor suggests an image of an absolute barrier at the highest level in the organization. However, the existence of women in executive positions tends to negate that charge. The glass ceiling metaphor also represents a single unvarying obstacle. But the challenges women face are multiple, complex, and changing. Aspirants to the superintendency do not merely encounter problems when they arrive in the seat of assistant superintendent or another entry position; many of them

encounter obstacles from the beginning when they start their careers or when they announce their aspirations for leadership roles. Also, women do not “drop out” in their pursuit of the superintendency only at the top; many abandon the hope long before they get there.

The glass ceiling also suggests transparency and that a woman cannot see the obstacles she faces ahead of time. However, some impediments are in fact obvious and can be identified and understood long before a woman reaches the advanced stages of her career. Constraints such as balancing career and family and inability to relocate can be addressed and handled in positive ways prior to their encounter. Eagly and Carli (2009) suggest the following:

Our metaphor of the labyrinth illustrates women's complex and circuitous paths to leadership. Some women do make it to the center of the labyrinth where leadership resides. Those who make their way through the labyrinth enjoy higher wages, greater respect and more authority. However, compared with the relatively straight route taken by men, women generally have to exert more effort and navigate more carefully to overcome obstacles. And women have had to be more patient because they seldom find themselves on the same fast track that quite a few men enjoy (p. 11).

The labyrinth conveys the idea of a complex journey that entails challenges yet offers a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not direct or simple, but requires perseverance, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the complexities that lie ahead. For women who aspire to attain the superintendency, routes to this goal do in fact exist but can present both expected and unexpected twists and turns. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to their center, it is understood that goals are attainable. But passing through a labyrinth is far more demanding than traveling along a straight path. The labyrinth

provides an encouraging metaphor for aspiring women and recognition of the challenges that these women face. The themes that emerged from the participants' voices in this study, *purpose, perseverance, people, and passion*, can serve as compass points to help the traveler along the way.

### *Implications*

The findings of this study provide implications for several groups who can make significant contributions to closing the divide between the number of men and women superintendents in North Carolina. These groups include: women who aspire to the superintendency; current women and men superintendents; college and university educational leadership programs; educational organizations; educational researchers; and school board associations and members.

Women who aspire to the superintendency need to understand and recognize obstacles that may await them in their journey to the superintendency. They need to be prepared for looming constraints and plan ahead for employing proven strategies to assist them in getting to where they want to go. Aspirants can learn a great deal about the process by hearing the stories of those who attained successful entry into the executive leadership position before them. The women participants in this study shared enlightening words of encouragement, advice, and guidance for others who wish to pursue the superintendency. These participants are role models. By becoming familiar with the journeys and experiences of role models, aspiring women may learn to navigate the dim corridors of the labyrinth that stand before them. Most importantly, women aspirants need to persevere just as the women superintendents in this study have done and not give up on their long-term goal of securing the superintendent position.



The findings of this study may be pertinent to current men and women superintendents by causing awareness of the need for mentors and sponsors for those women who may work for them who aspire to the superintendent position. Current superintendents can provide opportunities for growth and executive experiences for these candidates. In addition, the stories told and the perceptions collected as a result of this investigation add to the body of leadership literature. All leaders must continue to grow and develop their leadership potential by studying conventional and unconventional leaders and leadership styles.

It would be advantageous for college and university educational leadership programs to take into account the stories told by women for women. All of the women in this study held doctorates, and they believed it was the single-most successful strategy in helping them secure the position – it was the “ticket needed for entrance.” Therefore, higher educational institutions should consider offering doctoral degrees and focus on recruiting women into their programs as well as preparing them for the superintendency. Women now hold 58% of bachelor’s degrees (Eagly & Carli, 2009) and are earning the majority of advanced degrees, but many are not pursuing or gaining access into executive leadership positions. Across the nation, women hold only 13% to 18% of the public school superintendencies. Leadership programs should investigate “why” and tailor their programs to provide support in those areas identified. They need to offer courses to both men and women leaders that pertain to women’s ways of knowing and leading so that women may understand that their unique qualities are valued. Special attention to successful strategies used by women who have attained the position should be incorporated into the program to help women understand how to successfully move forward.

While organizations and programs that focus on women and leadership can be valuable for learning, networking, and modeling, their long-term benefit might be limited if men's voices are ignored or silenced. Women's ways of knowing and understanding are obviously critical, but if men, many of whom are gatekeepers, potential mentors, and access points to opportunity do not understand women's ways of knowing and leading and their role in that pantheon, they may not change. They can't, because they don't understand what women take for granted. Men have to be invited into these tents, given opportunities to learn, and have their voices listened to as well. It may be advantageous for the 87% (men holding the superintendency) to understand what the 13% (women holding the superintendency) go through. Opportunities that cater to the exclusivity of women certainly have their place, but if their consequence is to alienate half the population, many of whom sit in the seats of power, nothing of substance will likely change for women.

Educational researchers should be encouraged as a result of this study. There are still many more stories of women superintendents to be heard and recorded. There are still many more opportunities for investigation and documentation regarding the experiences of women in the executive leadership position. The body of literature is growing, but more studies need to be conducted to verify previous findings and to create new knowledge and understanding of women superintendents.

School board associations and members may benefit from understanding women superintendent candidates and the unique qualifications and perspectives they may bring to the position. Also, associations and members have an opportunity by reflecting on the research to critically analyze potential biases or discriminatory actions they may unconsciously perpetuate. They may become more cognizant of recognizing and rewarding

women's accomplishments by offering the superintendent position to a woman if indeed she is the best fit for the job. School boards may find the research useful as they examine their hiring processes and perceptions for possible discrimination.

### *Suggestions for Further Research*

The findings from this study reveal barriers women encounter in aspiring to the public school superintendent position in North Carolina as well as effective strategies they employed to navigate the barriers, resilience and perseverance skills they used and developed to sustain them on their journeys, and career paths that led to the superintendency. These findings suggest a number of areas for continued research.

Future studies identifying potential barriers and effective strategies and career paths need to be conducted in other states and across the nation at large so that a clearer picture will exist for those who aspire to the position. Findings from further research will also be of value to the groups implicated in the previous section by providing additional data that can be useful in their educational, professional, and hiring practices.

Another area of study is to examine both male and female superintendents' perceptions on their resilience and perseverance skills. No matter for which gender, the superintendency is difficult and requires a strong concept of self and an overabundance of resilience and perseverance in dealing with trials that are bound to arise. Leaders can learn from each other how best to cope and not just survive, but thrive in their positions.

Also research on mentoring strategies and their effects may be useful to leaders. This data could provide "best practices" in mentoring for both women and men leaders as they mentor and sponsor males and females who aspire to the superintendency.

More qualitative studies need to be conducted on and for women leaders that document and accurately portray their stories. Women need to have an opportunity to hear the unique journeys of other women so they will know that they are not alone. They need role models and examples of others who have attained success so that they may see it as a possible reality for themselves. It would be beneficial for men also as they mentor, recruit, and assist in the training and development of women who aspire to the superintendency.

Studies investigating women who are in educational leadership but who do not aspire to the superintendency would be of benefit. This information may reveal the reasons why more women do not aspire.

### *Conclusion*

This study revealed that women superintendents in North Carolina face many barriers on their way to the superintendency. The major barriers discovered were conflicting demands of career and family, lack of ability to relocate due to personal commitments, and the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men.

Although the women superintendents in this study encountered constraints, they also successfully employed effective strategies to help them overcome. The highly successful strategies identified in this study were obtaining a doctorate, developing a strong self concept, obtaining family support, learning coping skills to balance demands of career and family, strategically preparing for and broadening district-level experience, increasing flexibility to relocate, and pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure.

The career paths that led to the superintendency for the participants in this study were complex and multi-directional. Only one of the participants had a vertical path. The great

majority of the participants entered the superintendency from an assistant or associate superintendent position and were in the 40-49 year old range when they secured their first superintendent position.

All of the women superintendents who participated in this study exhibited high levels of resilience and perseverance skills. Their stories as told through the interviews triangulated the quantitative data obtained by the surveys verifying their capacities for commitment to long-term goals. Not only did they reveal their resilience and perseverance skills through the data collected by the survey instrument and interview protocol, their resumes and professional vitae verified their broad and extensive experiences in achieving credentials and in attaining leadership positions.

Four themes surfaced from the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. They were *purpose, perseverance, people, and passion*. Each of the participants had inspiring stories to tell, and through them all you could hear their voices collectively say, “We care about children.”

The original conceptual model was revised to include the findings of this study and to suggest a new metaphor for interpreting experiences of women who aspire to the superintendency in North Carolina. The new metaphor suggested for creating meaning obtained from the data collected in this study was the labyrinth. The labyrinth entailed multiple circuitous paths that sometimes revealed dead ends, but if the traveler refused to give up, she eventually found a path that led to the center. And so it was for the women in this study.

This study found that perceived barriers are real for women superintendents in North Carolina, but they can be navigated with strategic awareness. Through broadening

administrative experiences and by seeking opportunities for advancement within the organization, women may understand and strategically direct their paths through the labyrinth. Increasing flexibility in relocating and in managing responsibilities traditionally associated with women's roles in the home with the help of spouses or others assists women in being able to attain and assume the position of superintendent. This study found there is strength in women's ways of knowing and leading and that positioning oneself through study, experiences, and relationships is critical. Also, working with men and garnering their sponsorship without invading their sanctuary is another tool useful for navigation.

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is a message of hope; hope for all women who aspire to the superintendency. The journey may be long and winding, and the path may at times be temporarily blocked with obstacles and adversities. However, through resilience and perseverance, the executive office is within reach for women. By strategically planning to broaden experiences and to navigate impediments, women will continue to achieve success in attaining the chief executive position of school superintendent.

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APPENDIX A

**Variable Matrices**

Barrier (Dulac, 1992) Variables Matrix

		Woman's Place Model	Discrimination Model	Meritocracy Model
1.	Conflicting demands of career and family	X		
2.	Lack of ability to relocate as a result of personal commitment	X		
3.	The belief from others that women do not make good administrators			X
4.	Inappropriate/wrong career path experiences			X
5.	Socialization to "proper" roles for men and women	X		
6.	Predominance of male candidates for administrative positions		X	
7.	Lack of a male mentor/sponsor		X	
8.	Gender bias (Board members, personnel departments, etc) in the screening and selection process		X	
9.	Overt gender discrimination		X	
10.	Exclusion from informal socialization process of the "Good Old Boy" network		X	
11.	Lack of knowledge and understanding within the political realm			X
12.	Lack of motivation by women to compete for top positions			X
13.	The belief by others that women must be better qualified than men		X	
14.	Covert gender discrimination		X	
15.	Professional search firm's role in the selection process.		X	

Resilience (Patterson et al., 2009)/Perseverance (Duckworth et al., 2007) Variables Matrix

		Resilience/Thinking Skills	Resilience/Capacity Building Skills	Resilience/Action Skills	Perseverance
1.	I try to learn from others who have faced similar circumstances.	X			
2.	I seek differing perspectives before making tough decisions.	X			
3.	I expect good things to come out of adverse circumstances.	X			
4.	I want to hear the good and the bad news.	X			
5.	I listen to my inner voice more than to the voices of others.	X			
6.	I have a positive influence to make things happen.		X		
7.	I rely on friends, family, colleagues, and mentors for support.		X		
8.	I make time for exercise, hobbies, and social activities outside of work.		X		
9.	I make time to renew my spiritual self.		X		
10.	I make organizational decisions based on my personal values.		X		
11.	I accept responsibility for my mistakes.			X	

12.	I move forward with a decision even though the possible outcomes may be unclear.			X	
13.	I look to others for creative and/or flexible solutions to problems.			X	
14.	I persevere toward goals even when others think I should give up.			X	
15.	I am known for making decisions and sticking to them.			X	
16.	I have overcome setbacks to conquer important challenges.				X
17.	Setbacks do not discourage me for long.				X
18.	I am a hard worker.				X
19.	I finish whatever I begin.				X
20.	I have achieved a goal that took years of work.				X
21.	I am diligent.				X

APPENDIX B

**IRB Informed Consent for Participants**

**APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Informed Consent for Participants in  
Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

**Institutional Review Board  
Study #: 10-0261**

**Title of Project:** NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH: WOMEN SCHOOL  
SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

**Investigator(s):** Scarlet A. Davis

**I. Purpose of this Research/Project:** The purpose of this research is to identify perceived barriers women may face, successful strategies they may use, and resilience skills they may employ when aspiring to the public school superintendency in North Carolina. Biographic and demographic data will also be collected through submitted resumes or vitae to create a current profile of women superintendents in North Carolina. Participants in the study are women currently serving in the surperintendency in North Carolina as well as women who are not currently serving but have held the position within the past five years.

**II. Procedures:** You are being contacted via email regarding this study. An overview of the research as well as the *Informed Consent for Participants* is presented in this email. The link to a secure online survey for participants who wish to take part is provided in the introductory letter. Choosing to participate in the online survey will serve as your consent to participate in the study. Data collected through the survey will be extrapolated into a spreadsheet where data will remain secure and confidential. Online survey data will be destroyed from the website within 30 days of data collection.

In addition, you are being asked to submit a resume or vita as an attachment in a reply email to the researcher in order to collect data regarding career pathways of women superintendents in North Carolina. This document will be securely stored with the researcher and will be kept confidential during data analysis. Within 30 days of dissertation approval, the document will be securely destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview, you will have an opportunity to identify yourself in the *“Optional Information”* section of the survey. All information collected in the interview will be taped and transcribed by the researcher and will be returned to you for review and verification prior to data interpretation. The researcher will provide confidentiality of all responses and data.

**III. Risks:** There are no known risks involved in this research.

**IV. Benefits:** There are no direct benefits of the research to you. However, the data provided by you and other participants will assist women who aspire to the superintendency as well as gate keepers and others who oversee superintendent preparation programs.

**V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality:** The researcher will provide confidentiality of all data and responses.

**VI. Compensation:** There is no compensation for participating in this research.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw:** You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you will not be penalized in any way. You are free not to answer any survey questions or interview questions that you choose without penalty. There may be circumstances under which the researcher may determine that you should not continue as a participant.

### **VIII. Approval of Research**

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board of Appalachian State University.

6/14/2010  
IRB Approval Date

6/13/2011  
Approval Expiration Date

### **IX. Subject's Responsibilities**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

1. *To answer the online survey questions (15 minutes).*
2. *To provide the researcher with a current resume or vita by email.*
3. *To participate in a follow-up taped interview (30 minutes) if I so choose.*
4. *To review interview transcripts for accuracy if I so choose.*

### **X. Subject's Permission**

By completing and returning the survey, you are providing your voluntary consent.

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Scarlet A. Davis (828)264-7190 e-mail: DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us  
Investigator(s) Telephone/e-mail

Dr. Ken Jenkins (828)262-7232 e-mail: jenkinskd@appstate.edu  
Faculty Advisor (if applicable) Telephone/e-mail

Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to the IRB Administrator, Research and Sponsored Programs, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (828) 262-2130, [irb@appstate.edu](mailto:irb@appstate.edu).

APPENDIX C

**Cover Letter and Questionnaire**



June 19, 2010

Dear Current or Former Superintendent:

I am a doctoral candidate at Appalachian State University, and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that will attempt to determine the perceptions of barriers encountered and successful strategies used by women in attaining the superintendency in North Carolina. You were selected as a potential participant in this study because you are a woman superintendent or have been a superintendent recently (within the past five years) in a public school district in North Carolina. **Please do not proceed if you do not meet these qualifications.**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. There are no risks involved for participants. All women superintendents in North Carolina have been invited to participate. Your input will enhance the knowledge of how women perceive barriers and how they employ strategies during their ascent to the superintendency. This information will assist women educators and will provide information for aspiring superintendents.

Please take a moment to review the *Informed Consent for Participants* attached to this email in order to review the nature of my research. After reviewing, if you agree to participate, **please return a resume or vita** as an attachment to this email address, [DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us](mailto:DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us), so that I may collect career pathway data. Also, please complete the online survey. To access the survey, click on the link below or copy and paste the link into your web browser. The survey should take **no more than 15 minutes** of your time. Please complete the survey within the next 10 days by **June 29, 2010**.

<https://spreadsheets.google.com/viewform?formkey=dEdrYVExZFRNSTYxVzRvSFZkVkxqR1E6MQ>

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. **Complete confidentiality will be maintained throughout all phases of the research.** You may complete the online survey anonymously or you may include your name and contact information if you choose to participate in a brief follow-up interview and/or receive an abstract and details of how to access the findings of this study.

If you have questions regarding this study, please contact me at [DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us](mailto:DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us) and/or my dissertation committee chairman, Dr. Ken Jenkins, at [jenkinskd@appstate.edu](mailto:jenkinskd@appstate.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, please call the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Appalachian State University (828) 262-2130.

By completing the online survey, you are indicating you have read and understood the information provided above, that you are willing to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. Thank you for your assistance in my research endeavor.

Sincerely,  
Scarlet A. Davis  
Doctoral Candidate, Appalachian State University

## Women Superintendents Survey

**Dear Superintendent:** Thank you for taking a few minutes to respond to the following 44 questions regarding women superintendents. This survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Your survey results will remain completely confidential. Part I of the survey asks about your background and the makeup of your district. Part II asks you to consider your perceptions of barriers that may exist for women aspiring to the superintendency. Part III asks you to consider your perceptions of successful strategies women can use in securing the superintendency. Part IV asks you to supply information regarding resilience and perseverance skills you may have employed. Please complete the survey by **June 29, 2010**. Click on the following link to begin the survey.

### **Part I: Biographic and Demographic Information**

*Please choose the most appropriate answer.*

1. Current Age
  - a. Under 30
  - b. 30-39
  - c. 40-49
  - d. 50-59
  - e. 60 or over
  
2. Marital Status
  - a. Single
  - b. Married
  - c. Widowed
  - d. Divorced or separated
  - e. Partnered
  
3. Number of Children in School (K-12)
  - a. 0
  - b. 1
  - c. 2
  - d. 3
  - e. 4 or more

4. Age of Youngest Child
  - a. No children
  - b. Under five years old
  - c. 5-12 years old
  - d. 13-19 years old
  - e. 20 years old or above
  
5. Racial/Ethnic Origin
  - a. Native American
  - b. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - c. Hispanic
  - d. Black/non-Hispanic
  - e. White, non-Hispanic
  - f. Multi-racial
  
6. Highest Degree Earned
  - a. Bachelor's
  - b. Master's
  - c. Doctorate
  
7. Metro Status Where Employed of Current or Last Position
  - a. Urban (Population 100,000+)
  - b. Suburban (Population 10,000-99,999)
  - c. Town (Population 2,500-9,999)
  - d. Rural (Population less than 2,500)
  
8. ADM of your Current or Last District
  - a. Under 3,000
  - b. 3,000-9,999
  - c. 10,000-39,999
  - d. 40,000 or above
  
9. Number of Years in Education
  - a. 10 years or less
  - b. 11-15 years
  - c. 16-20 years
  - d. 21-25 years
  - e. 26-30 years
  - f. More than 30 years

10. Currently Employed as a Superintendent
    - a. Yes
    - b. No
  
  11. How You Were Hired for Present or Last Superintendent Position
    - a. From Within
    - b. Friend/Colleague Recommended
    - c. Professional Search Firm
    - d. Sought Position Yourself
    - e. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
  12. Number of Superintendent Positions Held
    - a. One
    - b. Two
    - c. Three or More
  
  13. Age at First Superintendency
    - a. Under 25 years
    - b. 25-29 years
    - c. 30-39 years
    - d. 40-49 years
    - e. 50-59 years
    - f. 60 or over
  
  14. Number of Years in the Superintendency
    - a. One
    - b. Two
    - c. Three
    - d. Four
    - e. Five or More
  
  15. Previous position held immediately preceding the superintendency (Please be specific.)
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**Part II**  
**Perceptions of Barriers**

*Please choose the number on the scale that best describes your perception of the possible barriers that women may contend when attempting to secure the superintendency.*

*(1=Not a Major Barrier, 5=Major Barrier)*

1.	Conflicting demands of career and family	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Lack of ability to relocate as a result of personal commitment	1	2	3	4	5
3.	The belief from others that women do not make good administrators	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Inappropriate/wrong career path experiences	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Societal socialization to “proper” roles for men and women	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Predominance of male candidates for administrative positions	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Lack of a male mentor/sponsor	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Gender bias (Board members, personnel departments, etc) in the screening and selection process	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Overt gender discrimination	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Exclusion from informal socialization process of the “Good Old Boy” network	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Lack of knowledge and understanding within the political realm	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Lack of motivation by women to compete for top positions	1	2	3	4	5
13.	The belief by others that women must be better qualified than men	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Covert gender discrimination	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Professional search firm’s role in the selection process.	1	2	3	4	5

Please cite other barriers that you perceive to impact women in securing the superintendency.

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**Part III:  
Perceptions of Strategies**

*Please choose the number on the scale that best represents your perception of each strategy as it relates to women securing the superintendency.  
(1=Not a Successful Strategy, 5=Highly Successful Strategy)*

1.	Increasing visibility in professional circles	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Obtaining a Doctorate degree	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Formulating and adhering to a plan of action to achieve career goals	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Preparing an effective resume/vita	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Utilizing a women’s network similar to the “Good Old Boy” network	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Gaining access to community power groups	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Enlisting a male mentor/sponsor	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Developing a strong self-concept	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Obtaining family support	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Learning coping skills to balance conflicting demands of career and family	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Enlisting a female mentor/sponsor	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Strategically preparing for and broadening district-level experience	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Increasing flexibility to relocate	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Seeking out professional search firms	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure	1	2	3	4	5

Please cite the top three strategies you believe helped in attaining the superintendency.

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**Part IV:  
Perceptions of Resilience and Perseverance Skills**

*Please choose the number on the scale that best represents you in adverse circumstances.*

*(1=Almost Always, 5=Almost Never)*

***When confronted with adversity,***

1.	I try to learn from others who have faced similar circumstances.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I seek differing perspectives before making tough decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I expect good things to come out of adverse circumstances.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I want to hear the good and the bad news.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I listen to my inner voice more than to the voices of others.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I have a positive influence to make things happen.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I rely on friends, family, colleagues, and mentors for support.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I make time for exercise, hobbies, and social activities outside of work.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I make time to renew my spiritual self.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I make organizational decisions based on my personal values.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I accept responsibility for my mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I move forward with a decision even though the possible outcomes may be unclear.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I look to others for creative and/or flexible solutions to problems.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I persevere toward goals even when others think I should give up.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	I am known for making decisions and sticking to them.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I have overcome setbacks to conquer important challenges.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Setbacks do not discourage me for long.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I am a hard worker.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I finish whatever I begin.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I have achieved a goal that took years of work.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	I am diligent.	1	2	3	4	5

Please share any additional information you believe has helped you in dealing with adverse circumstances.

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***Thank you for your time in completing this survey.***

**In order to compile information about the career pathways of women superintendents in North Carolina, please email your resume or vita to [DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us](mailto:DavisS@watauga.k12.nc.us).**

**Optional:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Check here if you would agree to a brief follow-up interview.

Check here if you would like a copy of the abstract and a link to the full dissertation.



APPENDIX D

**Interview Guide**

## Interview Guide

*Thank you for participating today in this follow-up interview regarding women superintendents in North Carolina. The interview consists of seven questions and should take no more than 30 minutes of your time. If you need a question repeated, please ask. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question, please say “pass.” Your responses will be recorded, transcribed, and emailed to you for verification prior to analysis. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

1. Please describe any significant personal or professional experiences that helped you attain the superintendency.
2. Results from the survey indicate top barriers for women may include conflicting demands of career and family, lack of ability to relocate as a result of personal commitment, and the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men. Did you encounter these or other barriers in your career path to the superintendency?
3. Results from the survey indicate top strategies for women in securing the superintendency may include obtaining a doctorate degree, developing a strong self-concept, and obtaining family support. Did you use these strategies or others to overcome barriers to attain the superintendency?
4. Resiliency is defined in this study as “the human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity”. Do you consider yourself to be a resilient person and/or leader? If so, who or what has contributed to your resilience capacity?
5. Perseverance is defined in this study as “passion for long-term goals”. Do you consider yourself to be a person and/or leader who perseveres? If so, who or what has contributed to your perseverance capacity?
6. If given the opportunity, would you do it all over again?
7. Are there any other thoughts or circumstances about your getting to the superintendency that you think are important, but were not addressed previously in the survey or interview?

*Thank you very much for your time today. I wish you continued success.*

## VITA

Scarlet A. Davis currently serves as Associate Superintendent of Technology, Accountability, and Auxiliary Services for Watauga County Schools in Boone, North Carolina. She has a B.A. degree from Wake Forest University, and a M.A. degree from Appalachian State University. She is a two-time National Board Certified Teacher and has served in the roles of elementary teacher, middle school teacher, academically gifted teacher, assistant principal, district curriculum coordinator, district instructional technology facilitator, district formative assessment program specialist, and director for accountability, Title 1, and instructional technology. Davis has been a test item writer, reviewer, and consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for the past 10 years. She has been a distinguished guest and panelist for the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation. In addition to her service in K-12 public education, she has served in higher education for eight years. Today, she continues to serve as an adjunct professor in the educational media master's degree program at Appalachian State University.

Ms. Davis has been a school Teacher of the Year recipient in Newton-Conover City Schools and was a finalist for the prestigious Marcellus Waddill Excellence in Teaching Award from Wake Forest University. She has participated in the American Association of School Administrators National Women's Conference, North Carolina Teacher Academy, the North Carolina Center for the Advancement in Teaching and is a professional member of the American Association of School Administrators, the International Society for Technology in Education, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

(ASCD), NCASCD, the North Carolina Technology in Education Society, and the North Carolina Association of School Administrators. Her research interests include instructional technology and global learning communities, teacher leadership, and executive leadership – specifically regarding women superintendents. She aspires to the superintendency and also hopes to be a published author in an educational journal in the near future.

Scarlet Davis is the proud mother of one son, Justin, a senior international business major at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She is a lifelong resident of North Carolina who permanently resides in the Rock Barn community in Conover, North Carolina.