

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE BOARDROOM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY OF SEVEN SUPERINTENDENTS

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by
JEREMY J. MONTAGUE

B.A., Central Methodist University, 2011
M.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014
Ed.S., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2016

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Jeremy J. Montague, Candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2019

ABSTRACT

School superintendents encounter a wide variety of unique and diverse challenges as they attempt to lead individuals and organizations toward success. As such, superintendents must be equipped with the skills to effectively lead districts through inherent challenges and complexities of the role. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the meaning of preparation for seven Midwestern district superintendents. The central question of the inquiry was: What essences of meaning do superintendents have of their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent? The theoretical lens of social constructionism and transcendental phenomenology contributed to the design of the data. Various aspects of experiential curriculum theory—political, autobiographical, and phenomenological—deepened an understanding of their experiences. Themes or meaning units were identified in three data sources: semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observations at board of education meetings, and analysis of key district and participant documents.

Analysis of documents revealed a common theme of *incremental improvements*, as superintendents performed their roles. Additionally, participants' observations generated

themes of *meetings as ceremonies* and the superintendent as a *storyteller*. Phenomenological analysis of the in-depth interviews captured five meaning units or themes as significant to their preparation experiences: *challenges*, *continued education*, *networking/mentoring*, *professional moves*, and *relationships*. Together, these findings represented the uniqueness as well as the complexities of the meaning of preparation for the group of superintendents.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “From the Classroom to the Boardroom: A Phenomenological Study of Seven Superintendents,” presented by Jeremy J. Montague, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Loyce Caruthers, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Educational Leadership, Policy & Foundations

Candace Schlein, Ph.D., Co-Chair
Curriculum and Instruction

Arthur Jacob, Ed.D.
Educational Leadership, Policy & Foundations

Uzziel Pecina, Ed.D.
Educational Leadership, Policy & Foundations

Raol Taft, Ph.D.
Curriculum and Instruction

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.

— Confucius, Philosopher

Growing up as the son of two educators, I could never escape school. I had the “opportunity” to go to school early with my parents, attend a full day of school under the watchful eyes of my parents’ colleagues or even one of my parents, stay after school waiting for tutoring to end, talk about school at the dinner table, and do school homework before bed. Although I spent an overabundance of time in school and I sometimes resented it, I look back now and am entirely grateful for school. Throughout my educational career, school has provided me a variety of experiences and opportunities. As an adult, I can now see the positive impact it has made. School provided my parents the setting where they met in the 1970s, and it provided the place where I met my wife in 2012.

School has also affected my life in another manner. It provided my parents two steady jobs that provided consistency. Two jobs that made it so my parents did not have to worry about where our next meal would come from or if our electricity would be turned off or how they would scrape up enough money to cover their mortgage. A job that allowed my parents to buy me clothes so I could fit in with my peers and participate in activities and to buy me a car when I turned 16. School provided a job that allowed each of them two weeks off at winter break, a week for spring break, and two and a half months during the summertime to spend with their children. School was a central theme in the Montague household, and it was not a shock to my parents when I declared I wanted to be a teacher when I was a junior in high school.

Looking back on my youth now, it is easy to see how privileged I was to grow up the way I did, but in the moment, I had no idea. It was not until I was in undergraduate school in a small town that I realized I had privilege and I had two major awakenings. The first was in a general studies class when a professor asked, “Why are you choosing to throw away your life in education when you could do so much more?” I bring light to this moment as an awakening, because it was the first time in my life that the profession of education was deemed unimportant and a wasteful endeavor. This was shocking to me. Could something that provided so much safety, consistency, and love be unimportant? This experience did not discourage me to continue pursuing what I loved.

The second awakening followed a year later while reading Vivian Paley as part of required readings for an early childhood class. It was through these readings that I explored issues of multiculturalism within the classroom and learned how to best support and promote a racially diverse classroom. It was through this literature that I truly learned about my whiteness and how privilege had played a role throughout my life. It was through these experiences that I decided to dedicate my life to making a positive impact and provide opportunities to as many students as possible by one day becoming a superintendent of schools.

When I entered the educational workforce as a teacher, it was during a time when a nearby district lost its state accreditation. I listened to teachers around me not voicing concern about the lack of quality educational opportunities for the students or about the direction the district was heading and the impact it would have on students. Rather, teachers focused on what would happen if students began shifting to our predominately white suburban school district and how they, the teachers, could possibly work with urban

students. The desire to help all students was absent. As a brand-new educator, I was ready to make an impact for all the students I worked with, but my influence was limited by my role as a paraprofessional in the school.

I set out to change my limited influence the best I could by enrolling in a graduate program and by assuming a variety of leadership roles within my building. It was during this time I was blessed with having multiple mentors who took me under their wing and coached me into the leader I am today. It was also through these mentors I saw the effect that strong leaders can have on the positive culture of a school, teachers' attitudes toward their jobs, and student achievement.

Partway through my second graduate program I began to truly understand the roles and responsibilities superintendents hold within a district. Through a variety of practicum experiences, I had the opportunity to attend meetings, do walkthroughs, and participate in professional development aimed at district level leaders. Through these programs and when I eventually moved into an administration role, I witnessed firsthand how priorities were structured within a district. I also observed how the district's vision and mission were set. While everything is done in conjunction with the board of education, the superintendent is responsible to accomplish the goals and objectives set forth, making him or her the most vital member within the organization.

This educational journey illuminates important milestones in my life that all lead up to the culmination of my graduate experience, my dissertation. With aspirations to become a successful superintendent who will make a positive and lasting impression for all students, understanding preparatory experience of superintendents is vital. Preparation for the position is essential because superintendents' average length of service nationwide is just three short

years. Three years is an extremely high rate of turnover for a leadership position that requires stability. With the revolving door of superintendents, how are new superintendents prepared to handle the complex job responsibilities? This study seeks to understand that question by looking at the essence of the meaning of preparation for the position of superintendent.

Statement of the Problem

In an increasing and ever-changing age, school superintendents encounter a variety of unique and diverse challenges as they attempt to lead individuals and organizations toward success. These superintendents must be equipped with a plethora of skills to lead these districts through the inherent challenges and complexities of the job. However, the complex responsibilities and the stressors associated with the job may contribute to a high turnover rate in the position. Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, and Ellerson (2011) reported on a nationwide electronic survey of superintendents in response to a question about their future positions. A resounding 49% of current superintendents responded that they did not plan to be a superintendent in 2015. This suggested the probability of substantial turnover, which mirrors current realities related to the retention rates of superintendents. The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) surveyed superintendents across the largest 53 urban school districts nationwide and found an average retention rate of just 3.18 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014).

The question of why superintendents leave their positions has been asked by many researchers. Grissom (2012) conducted a mixed methods study of 215 superintendents in California and identified factors contributing to superintendent turnover. The researcher matched superintendent and school board data with hand-collected news sources on why

superintendents left and where they went. The findings were that 45% of superintendents exited the field entirely within three years, which mirrors the average retention rate from the CGCS survey. While the data highlighted superintendents exiting the field in California, Grissom and Mitani (2016) conducted a quantitative analysis using longitudinal personal data of superintendent transitions in Missouri. The researchers found superintendents moved toward districts with more advantaged student populations, systematically transferred toward larger school districts (about 600 more students), and received a salary bump of around \$10,000. The average length of service of study participants was 4.25 years.

Although the aforementioned studies highlighted moves from district to district, Boyland and Ellis (2015) conducted a quantitative survey to gather retirement data from superintendents in Indiana. They found a record number of 62 superintendents or around 21% of the state's superintendent population entered retirement in 2012 and 2013. Transitions to retirement were echoed in Glass and Franceschini's (2006) quantitative research in the *State of American School Superintendency*, which elicited responses from thousands of superintendents nationwide via electronic surveys. They found that due to an aging population and a trend toward entering the position later in one's career, superintendents retire at a quicker rate than in the past. While these studies spotlight the exit of superintendents from the position, research examining superintendent reasons for leaving the field remain scarce (Peterson, Fusarelli, & Kowalski, 2008).

The impact superintendents have on the districts in which they serve is also scarcely noted in the literature. The limited research suggests successful execution of central management functions such as staff recruitment, financial management, leadership of instruction, and strategic planning all help create positive learning environments within

schools, which may indirectly impact student achievement (Alsbury, 2008a; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Petersen, 2002). In a meta-analysis of 27 quantitative studies that determined the characteristics of effective school leadership, Marzano and Waters (2006) found superintendent longevity has a positive effect on student achievement. Likewise, Sparks (2012) maintained “stability at the central office has been linked to a greater likelihood of success for new education initiatives” (p. 2). While researchers cite the impact of superintendent longevity, superintendents must be prepared to execute the tasks and responsibilities of the position. The current preparation measures or lack of preparation measures in place to adequately prepare superintendent candidates for the complex responsibilities and stressors of the position are impacted by the limited mentoring opportunities available. While superintendents must continue to learn on-the-job, most are working in isolation, many miles away from colleagues who can identify and understand the challenges (Augustine-Shaw & Funk, 2013).

Defining exactly what mentoring is can be difficult. Kram, a leading researcher in the area of mentoring and the author of the most frequently cited articles on mentoring, conceptualized what a mentoring is. She states that mentoring “involves an intense relationship whereby a senior or more experienced person (the mentor) provides two functions for a junior person (the protégé): advising or modeling about career development behaviors and providing personal support, especially psycho-social support” (Kram, 1983, p. 126). A more recent definition from Bozemen and Feeney (2008) builds from this conceptualization with their definition of mentoring. They state that mentoring is:

A process for the reciprocal, informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psycho-social support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face

to face and over a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor), to a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé). (p. 469)

These mentors help mentees assess their current careers and act as guides for transitioning toward their future career pathways. “For those select few educational leaders who find themselves in the position of superintendent, they often find themselves having few opportunities to learn alongside seasoned mentors in the field” (Augustine-Shaw & Funk, 2013, p. 20). Due to the nature of the position, superintendents must be extraordinary leaders, and preparation programs should equip them with the skills necessary to lead their districts.

Jones (2011) used a mixed methodology to study Texas public school superintendents and incorporated a focus group interview to examine the factors contributing to a successful transition into the role of superintendent. The researcher found many superintendents, both experienced and novices, learned much of their knowledge and skills through on-the-job experiences, and the most important guidance or training received was through a mentor. While using mentors for guidance is one way to prepare for the position, higher education is the initial preparation pathway. Glass and Franceschini, in their 2006 study, reported that most superintendents rated their preparation (in graduate school) as effective or very effective (71% for their master’s program and 57% for their doctoral program), but such preparation was likely insufficiently focused on the superintendency. Further, findings suggested only about 20% of superintendents had access to a formal mentoring program, but almost all participants agreed that such mentoring programs are important for aspiring, new, and experienced superintendents.

McCord, Jordan, and Jordan (2008) researched mentoring for the Center for Systems Leadership of the American Association of School Administrators and explored the availability and quality of mentoring for new and experienced superintendents. They found mentoring and leadership development was rare, which led to new superintendents feeling ill-equipped for the increasing accountability demands and fiscal pressures which come with leading the district.

Educational leaders are not adequately prepared to assume responsibility of most districts, resulting in short tenures in the position and superintendents moving from district to district or into retirement (Grissom, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Inadequacy of mentoring, higher education preparation, and on-the-job training opportunities do not prepare superintendents for the complexities and stressors of the position, resulting in a limited number of high-quality candidates for filling the future void of superintendents. Developing a deeper understanding of how superintendents are prepared to handle the myriad of job responsibilities and duties that are required of them is imperative.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the meaning of preparation for the position of superintendent in Midwestern school districts. While superintendent preparation is still not defined by a national curriculum (Kowalski, 2006), at this stage in the research, the preparation of superintendents is generally defined as superintendents feeling ready to assume the role and all of the responsibilities of superintendent. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined phenomenology as “describing the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all

participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 75). Moustakas (1994) defined the path of transcendental phenomenology as “leading to knowledge in the absolute sense” (p. 40). Along this path, knowledge emerges to “a person who is open to see what it is, just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms” (p. 41). Transcendental phenomenology was utilized in the research design in order to understand the essence of the meaning of new superintendents and their perception of preparedness to assume the role of superintendent.

Research questions were aligned to the purpose of the study and guided the study’s methodology. The central question and sub-questions included: What essences of meaning do superintendents have of their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

- a. What meanings do they communicate about the role of professional experiences in their preparation for superintendent?
- b. In what ways do they describe the role of higher education programs in their preparation for superintendent?
- c. How do they experience the role of mentoring in their preparation for superintendent?

Theoretical Framework

Superintendents are not adequately prepared to assume complex responsibilities, which results in short tenures and a high turnover rate. This study was designed to understand the meanings of the lived experiences of preparation of superintendents. The purpose and goals of this study were driven by the conceptual or theoretical framework. According to Maxwell (2013), the interchangeable terms of conceptual framework,

theoretical framework, and idea context are “a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs research” (p. 39).

My personal life experiences as a teacher and administrator have provided me multiple opportunities to work alongside superintendents. This has led me to understand and witness first-hand the variety of challenges and complexity of responsibilities superintendents deal with on a daily basis. I have witnessed superintendents respond appropriately to situations, acting out of preparedness. I have also experienced superintendents unsuccessfully navigate high level situations and respond inappropriately. All of these situations in my experience have impacted students at one level or another.

From these experiences, I bring many assumptions or beliefs to this study. I believe superintendents leave the position because they are not adequately prepared to assume the role. They do not find success and therefore leave or transition from the position before being fired. Due to the complexity of the role, I believe superintendents need to have a variety of preparation experiences, so they find success in their essential role. Higher education experiences should focus on building foundational knowledge while also providing practicum experiences that might not be available to the student otherwise. Professional experiences should encompass a variety of administration and leadership roles, such as being a building principal and roles within central office, for extended periods of time. The most significant of these, I believe, is the role mentors play in preparing and working with new superintendents as they begin the journey of superintendent. Through all of these experiences and assumptions, I bring a critical lens through which the topic of superintendent preparedness was viewed throughout the study.

Through an extensive search of the literature, from multiple journal databases, article searches, professional publications, government websites, and books, I constructed a framework for my research. While there are a variety of studies and research from doctoral students to well-known scholars in the field of educational leadership, the specific topic of superintendent preparation returned little results. One professional organization, the School Superintendent Association, regularly publishes large amounts of quantitative data to highlight superintendents' trends and statistics. Much of the research returned was from doctoral students rather than from results of studies involving superintendents and preparedness. Even with regular publications in professional organization literature, gaps still exist in the research and published literature about superintendent preparation.

The structural framework was built from multiple supports (higher education, professional experiences, mentoring, and leadership) which provided the study a strong foundation in which literature was reviewed. Viewing these areas from a perspective or lens allowed the viewer a certain position or situation. The standpoints of social constructionism and different perspectives of curriculum theory were used as paradigmatic underpinnings throughout this study. With the focus in the present study on the essence of the meaning of preparation for superintendents, their experiences linked well with several perspectives of curriculum theory, discussed later in the text: political, autobiographical, and phenomenological curriculum theory (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2008).

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism begins with the premise that the human world is different from the natural, physical world and therefore must be studied differently (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The positioning of social constructionism is not a singular theory, but rather a large

encompassing family of related theories, that even sometimes seem to not be compatible. For the purpose of this study, social constructionism rejects “the very notion of an inherent human nature existing across persons. This perspective emphasizes contextual, linguistic, and relational factors combining to determine the kinds of human being that people will become and how their views of the world develop” (Raskin, 2002, p. 9). Social constructionism provided a lens to observe ways of talking and being in the world as a “viable option for coordinating and negotiating through the social world of others” (Efran, McNamee, Warren, & Raskin, 2014, p. 2). Patton (2015) also believes that the construction of the phenomenological essences is socially created. This lens is highly appropriate when looking at the essence of experiences superintendents create because it studies the multiple realities constructed by superintendents based on their experiences.

Schools’ boards of education interact with school superintendents on a regular basis. Through a social constructivist lens, these interactions and experiences create knowledge. Social constructionism is interested in “how learners engage in a conversation with [their own or other people’s] artifacts, and how these conversations boost self-directed learning, and ultimately facilitate the construction of new knowledge” (Ackermann, 2001, p. 1). Alsbury (2008b) notes that although superintendent interactions occur regularly, over the last few decades, there has been a deterioration of superintendent and board relations as a result of a lack of trust in public officials.

Bowers (2016) conducted a qualitative case study of school board and superintendent relations. With two superintendents in California as participants, the researcher used interviews and ethnographic field notes to shed light on the experiences of superintendents as they worked to facilitate trust with an untrusting team (their school board). The findings

from the study illuminated the need for superintendents to intentionally develop relationships with board members as individuals and communicate with them in a fashion that meets their needs and personal tastes. The findings aligned with other research of superintendents who were labeled as high trust, high impact, and effective as: informative, forthcoming, truthful, and open about sharing information (Hackett, 2015). A common theme throughout the study was communication and thus, the social interaction between two agents to create knowledge. Bryk and Schneider (2002) asserted that schools are social enterprises that are dependent on the relationships among the various community stakeholders. Using social constructionism as a lens to view higher education experiences, professional experiences, mentor experiences, and twenty-first century leadership experiences was highly appropriate. The experiences of superintendents connect with curriculum theory, defined by Pinar (2004) as experiences that cross various disciplines.

Curriculum Theory

Curriculum theory, a branch of curriculum studies, has a history, a complex present, and an uncertain future. Researchers present various broad definitions of curriculum theory, but a brief definition is that curriculum theory is the interdisciplinary study of educational experiences (Pinar, 2004). Phillion, He, and Connelly (2008) echo this: “curriculum theory is a complex, multidiscursive academic discipline devoted to understanding educational experience, focused on, but hardly limited to, the encoding of such experience in the school curriculum” (p. 502). This interdisciplinary structure within the field allows a strong influence to occur in the humanities and arts, while also making curriculum theory a distinct specialization within the field of education. Curriculum theorists’ commitment to the study of education is encoded in school curriculum and the potential of educational experiences.

Linné (2015) stated that choosing a curriculum theory, in regard to educational research, means questioning how knowledge that is transmitted in an educational context is selected, valued, and organized, and furthermore, questioning how that knowledge process can be understood.

Within the branch of curriculum theory remain several specific lenses through which to view curriculum. Phillion, He, and Connelly (2008) list just a few of these perspectives: political curriculum theory, multicultural curriculum theory, feminist curriculum theory, curriculum theory and gender, theological curriculum, aesthetic curriculum theory, autobiographical curriculum theory, phenomenological curriculum theory, postmodernism in curriculum theory, and poststructuralism in curriculum theory. Each lens has a rich history and way of viewing and interpreting curriculum. Although each standpoint is highly specific,

Curriculum theory is essentially concerned with the whole, the corpus of curriculum and its social, political, and cultural context. It is concerned with curricular connections between the various subject matters and between these and the many topics and preoccupations of the in-between literature. Moreover, it is concerned with the connections between all of these matters and political, social, cultural, national, and global contexts. (Phillion et al., 2008, p. 522)

Using perspectives within curriculum theory to question and view the knowledge transmitted throughout the preparation experiences of superintendents, I better understood superintendents' educational experiences and their feelings of preparedness.

Using different lenses within curriculum theory allows for the curriculum to be viewed as a lived experience. Dewey's (1938) educational philosophy pointed to the importance of a continuum of experiences that promote or hinder how learning is organized. Kolb (2015) further contended that through these lived experience or life experiences,

experiential learning occurs. Experiential learning is based on principles of conflict resolution, adaptation to the real world, synergistic transactions between the person and the environment, and creation of social constructivist knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Hyle, Ivory, and McClellan (2010) conducted a qualitative study of 37 superintendents, 35 of whom served in a district of fewer than 1,000 students, who represented the Midwest, southwest, west, and southeast United States. Due to the difference of opinions among leadership scholars of preparation programs and the varying types of defined and valued knowledge, the researchers focused on identifying what knowledge counts for educational leaders. Through interviews and focus groups, the researchers found three main themes. The first theme was competing visions in which superintendents stated they must maintain their focus throughout their work with groups. Participants stated that disseminating their impressionistic knowledge of what they could accomplish amid competing visions was crucial. The second theme that emerged from the data was situated decisions. Participants described this as gathering and listening to many perspectives regarding a situation during the decision-making processes and then ultimately making the decision. The final theme of regulating balance, knowing how to be the center of the wheel, was regarded by the participants as always being knowledgeable about everything in the district because they are in charge of literally everything. Overall, the researchers determined that superintendents appeared to be in constant and fluid negotiations of what knowledge they selected, valued, and then transmitted to the learning community, based on their prior experiences.

Overview of Methodology

This transcendental phenomenological study was designed to understand the essence of the meaning of preparation for new superintendents. The qualitative tradition of

phenomenology was the methodological framework used for the study. Husserl (2014) explained the aim for phenomenology is to capture the experience or essence, without the researcher trying to interpret, explain, or theorize what is taking place. Superintendent participants throughout the Midwest were identified using criterion sampling and random purposeful sampling. The sampling tools used to recruit superintendents was an invitational email to participate in the study; each had to possess a doctoral degree. In order to establish collaboration with participants throughout this study, participants were considered as co-researchers. Creswell and Miller (2000) explained this relationship in the following manner:

Collaboration means that the participants are involved in the study as co-researchers or in less formal arrangements. This validity lens is one of building the participant's view into the study. It belongs to a critical paradigm perspective because the intent of the process is to respect and support participants in a study, not further marginalize them. (p. 128)

Data sources consisted of multiple, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document collection. Interviewing was the primary source of data as described by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) as an "attempt to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world" (p. 3). Observations of superintendents interacting within the community at board of education meetings were combined with collected documents such as certifications, mission/vision/values of the district, and the past five-year history of the annual yearly progress of the district to corroborate the interview findings. The primary data analysis method was transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), in which the information was reduced to significant statements and combined into meaning units which were similar to themes. The interpretation of data in the process of transcendental phenomenology requires the development of three types of reports: textural, structural, and group composite.

The textural description reflected what the superintendents experienced, and a structural description depicted how they experienced the phenomenon of preparation, which allowed me to develop the essence of the superintendents' meanings of preparedness through a composite report for the group. To analyze the observations and documents, all data were transcribed, followed by making interpretations through descriptive coding, categorizing or grouping descriptive codes into interpretive codes, and finally grouping interpretive codes to form themes. The themes from the documents and observations contributed to crystallization of findings. Ellingson (2009) described the value of crystallization:

Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (p. 4)

The two methodological approaches provided meaningful data that deepened my understanding of the essence of the meanings of superintendent preparation through the perceptions of the co-researchers. These steps will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Significance of the Study

The current study focuses on superintendents' experiences that led to their perceptions regarding preparedness to assume the role of superintendent. A shortage of qualified superintendents exists due to many current superintendents being eligible for retirement. All prospective candidates need to be appropriately prepared for the job (Romo, 2013). Numerous factors make this study significant and appropriate. Aspiring Midwestern superintendents are the primary audience of this study; they may use the findings from this

study to ensure they take the appropriate steps and actions to best prepare to assume the role of superintendent. Lytle and Sanaghan (2008) stated that new superintendents must sufficiently prepare themselves for the complex tasks and challenges for which they are responsible when assuming the role of superintendent. Acting and novice superintendents may also utilize the information presented in this study to undertake additional experiences for success in their roles.

University preparation programs will also benefit from this study. Lytle and Sanaghan (2008) noted that higher education preparation programs may not have fully prepared aspiring superintendents for the complex variables involved in the role, which include but are not limited to board politics and increased accountability measures. Preparation programs must address these and other areas to best meet the needs of aspiring superintendents. Findings will also help to prepare other educational leaders seeking central office positions in school districts. Furthermore, superintendents need support when they are not fully prepared for the role (Andrews & Grogan, 2002; Hess, 2003). Superintendent turnover is a real problem all districts will face at one time or another. This study aimed to also provide school board members with information and knowledge regarding the experiences of new superintendents that will support the selection and hiring process. School boards and hiring firms can generate a framework that can be used to develop specific candidate profiles for the superintendent position. Information presented in this study will also allow school boards to develop policies and practices to best ensure their new superintendent is best prepared to assume the role of superintendent. Marshall and Ray (2006) noted, “in an era of tight budgets and high stakes testing, transition from one leader

to the next can potentially damage a district for years to come” (p. 5). This further highlights the importance of ensuring the superintendent candidate is fully prepared for the position.

Professional organizations, such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), will be informed by characteristics that lead to superintendents feeling prepared. While national principal organizations call for induction programs, Bangert (2012) recognized the growing consensus that traditional pre-service administrative programs have not adequately prepared candidates for their administrative roles. These organizations and agencies who put forth requirements and certification programs will be better informed to develop specialized professional development to support new and experienced superintendents.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction of the study, provided an overview of the phenomenological study, which included the perceptions of preparedness of superintendents in the Midwest. The problem of superintendents not being adequately prepared as high-quality candidates was discussed, as well as the purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and an overview of the methodology. Chapter 2 further delineates the theoretical or conceptual framework that serves as the lens for understanding the essence of co-researchers’ meanings related to preparedness for the superintendent role. In Chapter 3, the literature review, I discuss a variety of empirical studies and theories that undergird this dissertation, including the historical background and educational leadership theories relevant to the study. The methodology, including demographics of the co-researchers, sampling strategies, data collection, and analysis, is thoroughly outlined and discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter also includes the study’s

limitations, including reliability, validity, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the results of the data analysis and illuminates the meanings superintendents attributed to the phenomena. Chapter 6 includes implications of the findings and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose and goals of this study were driven by the theoretical framework which is a system of assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform research (Maxwell, 2013). As a result of my personal experiences and my assumptions, I brought a critical lens through which the topic of superintendent preparedness was viewed in this study. Social constructionism provided a perspective, and perspectives within curriculum theory provided standpoints from which to view the study. This structural framework had a strong foundation in literature built from multiple supports: higher education, professional experiences, mentoring, and leadership.

Each of these supports was chosen for a specific reason. Higher education was selected for this study due to all superintendents experiencing some form of extended and formal learning beyond their high school education. Social constructionism allows the viewing of superintendent experiences and how superintendents learn in a social context. Curriculum theory perspectives allowed the curricula experienced by superintendents in higher education to be viewed and questioned. Professional or career experience was selected due to superintendents experiencing a variety of positions, regardless of their pathway, before entering the superintendency. Collin and Guichard (2011) brought attention to the fact that careers are socially constructed, which allows the social constructionism lens to be applied. Because superintendents could hold different career positions and could come from non-education backgrounds, viewing career positions from different lenses within curriculum theory was extremely difficult. Covering and reviewing different superintendent career positions through different subfields within curriculum theory is contextually

dependent on the knowledge conveyed, which greatly varies with career position, time period experienced, and geographical location. Thus, what is important to this study is experiential curriculum theory, which is unique to each superintendent.

Mentors have been utilized for superintendents and in various career positions leading up to the superintendency. As a result, mentoring is a strong support upon which this study is built. Mentorships allow for superintendents to construct their meaning through social interaction (social constructionism) and mentors, regardless of the structure of the experience, disseminate selected knowledge to their protégé (curriculum theory). Lastly, twenty-first century leadership is an important preparation structure as superintendents encounter and navigate the complex problems facing schools in the today. Through social constructionism, one can view how educational leaders and schools work to create knowledge from interactions to solve the unique problems they face. The multifaceted nature of experiential curriculum theory provided an appropriate lens through which to analyze this knowledge and how it was selected, organized, and distributed.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is based on the premise that reality is socially constructed through communication and is different than the physical world (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985, 1999b). Pearce (1995) and Potter (1996) stated that social constructionism has been used in various ways and is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide family of approaches (e.g., conversation analysis, discourse analysis, rhetoric). Constructionism focuses on the art of learning, or “learning to learn,” and on the significance of constructing knowledge through learning. Social constructionism is interested in “how learners engage in a conversation with [their own or other people’s] artifacts, and how these conversations boost self-directed

learning, and ultimately facilitate the construction of new knowledge” (Ackermann, 2001, p. 1). Social constructionism provides an ontological perspective that views knowledge, identity, and social reality as constructed by humans. Due to this wide application, these principles and ideas are among the most cited in both education and psychological circles today as researchers ground their work in a number of social constructivist theories (Knapp, 2019).

Social constructionism emerged and was first articulated by Lev Vygotsky (1929) as an understanding that learning is a social experience and not an individual one. Vygotsky’s key point was focused on children’s knowledge development, which was influenced most by interactions with people (e.g., parents, other children, teachers, mentors) in the child’s social environment. Knowledge development and construction is created through dialogue and interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). This co-constructed knowledge in the social environment is possible as people use the tool of language to construct meaning. This interpsychological tool is central to the learning process in social constructivist thought. Marsh and Ketterer (2005) stated that successful learning can result in an internal dialogue as an intrapsychological tool that can be used in the future across various situations. As people negotiate meaning, they not only impact the intrapsychological processes, but impact the interpsychological group processes (Chang-Wells & Wells, 1993; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Focusing on language, Burr (1995) stated that the social constructionism perspective involves an epistemological stance in which ways of knowing are navigated by interactions. Stewart (1995) echoed the perspective as being critical of the representational views of language and advocated the view that language gives the power to bring things into

existence. Four types of knowledge can be constructed through these dialogic interactions (Shields & Edwards, 2005): (a) knowledge about how others perceive a particular subject; (b) knowledge that the other gains about you and how you perceive a particular subject; (c) knowledge that is generated as the two views are synthesized; and (d) knowledge that one gathers about one's self in terms of one's prejudices and situatedness, and the more nuanced (and changed) understanding of the subject as a result of the process. This language opens our eyes to the diverse ways in which our experience—our individual subjectivity—is shaped and co-constructed by the social worlds.

When people interact with language applied to a shared experience, an agreement is created that the idea has validity. This social interaction and creation of agreement is what Gergen (1985) called communities of shared intelligibility. Communities of shared intelligibility are similar to the other terms describing this concept which are communities of understanding or consensualities (Cottone, 2012) and bracketed absolute truth (Cottone, 2011). The ability to learn through dialogue and interaction with others is central to knowledge generation (Churcher, Downs, & Tewksbury, 2014). As people work together to navigate shared experiences and realities, experiences and interactions can go beyond mere social construction of knowledge (Fleury & Garrison, 2014). These researchers stated it can extend and also include the realization that all meaning, minds, selves, forms of rationality, free will, rights, values, and so on are also social constructions. The lens of social constructionism is highly appropriate to view the multiple supports of this study: higher education experiences, professional experiences, mentor experiences, and twenty-first century leadership. These four areas connect specifically to each topic due to the social nature of experiences.

Higher Education Experiences

Higher education institutions develop a variety of programs and course offerings to educators who are contemplating becoming educational leaders within their school networks. Around 28% of superintendents in districts with fewer than 1,000 students have a doctorate, but 97% of superintendents in districts between 5,000 to 25,000 students have a doctorate (Domenech, 2009). While higher education experiences might be seen as an individual process that is directed toward individual mastery, all learning is constructed in a social context. Formal and informal attributes of learning occur through these programs and through discourses experienced by aspiring superintendents. Through discourse, superintendents are able to witness the richness of various learning interactions that matter: teacher to students, teacher to teacher, and student to student (Alford, 2012).

Hollingworth, Sullivan, Condon, Bhatt, and Brandt (2012) conducted a research study to determine how universities were remodeling their licensure programs in order to prepare twenty-first century superintendents. In collaboration with Regents University, the State Department of Education, the state association of school administrators, and the Research Educational Laboratory (REL), the researchers sought input from current and aspiring superintendents throughout the Midwest. Through 505 electronic survey responses and two focus groups consisting of 21 aspiring and current superintendents, the overall research findings highlighted the significance of social interaction during graduate experiences and preparation. Participants believed through professional learning community cohorts, they could collectively problem solve, build knowledge, and build their professional networks. Another finding from the study pointed toward the significance of instructional delivery. A clear majority of aspiring and current superintendents preferred the social aspect

of the instructional delivery model of face-to-face with an instructor and online. This model was chosen over online only, instructor only, and no preference.

The significance of a socially constructed learning environment was also reinforced in Chan's 2018 study to identify knowledge construction in the higher education community. Through 20 interviews of graduate students with varying genders, ages, careers, and social positions, the researcher found five major patterns in regard to participants learning and life experiences. The five patterns generalized from the analysis of data included: radiation (how knowledge is shared among learners and proliferated from individual learners to the public through various tools), circulation (how people gain certain knowledge by interacting with the multiple dimensions of this knowledge), simulation (how people gain knowledge suitably analogous through a process of observation, imitation, and adaptation), socialization (how people are involved in the changed sociocultural context), and contextualization (the process of gaining new knowledge by situating the knowledge in the local authentic context, or generating local tacit knowledge into explicit/public knowledge). Chan found that the patterns reinforce the ideas of social construction and emphasize the different aspects of learning in the process of constructing knowledge. Social interactions, social relationships, social connections, knowledge relevance, and knowledge and its social entities play significant roles in knowledge construction (Chan, 2018).

The importance of social interactions, social relationships, and social connections for knowledge construction in the academic setting was disputed by Brooks (2007). Through a series of in-depth interviews, the researcher looked at how the nature of friendships established in the higher education setting impacted students' beliefs related to their academic and non-academic experiences. The major finding was that participants believed

they established closer, deeper, and more open relationships at the university level than at any previous point in their life. The study also found that those participants rarely felt that their friends played a direct role in facilitating academic or intellectual learning. When participants spoke to other students about their academic work, it was about generic issues such as deadlines and workloads rather than substantive content of their courses. Instead, there was a strong belief that other students played an important role in what was described as social learning. Through social learning, students felt they could develop confidence about their identity and their abilities. Through the friendships and relationships they constructed, higher education students compared their grades received to ensure they were making good progress, to reaffirm they were being rewarded for their hard work, or to ensure they were not the only ones getting marked down on work.

Professional Experiences

While a variety of different paths and career choices lead to the position of superintendent, once there, these educational leaders assume the same job responsibilities. Collin and Guichard (2011) drew attention to the fact that careers are socially constructed due to the shared understanding co-created by groups of people in the educational community. Throughout experiences along the pathway to the superintendency and through different environments, aspiring superintendents typically were experienced classroom teachers and educational leaders who interacted well within the school community (Brown, O'Connor, Neal, & Overturf, 2011). Through these different positions, aspiring superintendents have a myriad of experiences that situates them in the social context.

When we replace the discourses of an essentialist, individual self with constructs that suggest we have multiple identities which are contextually interdependent; when we can acknowledge the ways we are shaped by our discursive environments; and when

we situate ourselves not only in a physical environment but also in a social ecosystem, then we can begin to conceptualize ourselves as inextricably interlinked with others, participants in a human network, a social ecosystem. (Alford, 2012, p. 299)

Educational leaders negotiate or socially construct understandings as they navigate the social network that involves those stakeholders in the education community. Burr (1995) stated that social constructionism brings into view the critical significance of knowledge that can transform into social action. This can result in generative discourses that challenge the existing traditions of knowledge and possibly suggest new actions.

Froggett, Ramvi, and Davies (2015) echoed this understanding by stating that from a constructionism paradigm, the personal and professional self is a mix of intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, cultural, and societal elements. When considering the social interactions of superintendents' professional and career experiences, the personal and professional self from an individual perspective cannot be left intact—one is always in interactions with others. Paraponaris and Sigal (2015) drew attention to these interactions, stating that “knowledge sharing is socialized and the new knowledge is created through interactions between individuals” (p. 889). Through participation in the learning community, school leaders change and become different persons with each interaction and learning. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009) pointed to the importance of the relationship between growth from the personal interactions and the change of personal identity. As leaders participate and those in the community participate, the community itself changes; cultural practices change as new meanings and knowledge are constructed to address conflicts and contradictions (McIlveen & Schultheiss, 2012). Educational communities are not static but are constantly changing as a result of the experiences of those participating within them.

Johnson's (2000) phenomenological study of five new superintendents in Ohio and Pennsylvania, through interviews and observations, focused on capturing participants' social realities as they transitioned from their previous roles. His findings suggested specific administrative positions are not required preparatory steps, and other leadership positions are only related because they fall within a bureaucratic structure. Regardless of their past roles and socializations in other positions within educational administration, each superintendent participant responded to now becoming "immersed" in the new position of superintendency. Although this study highlights superintendents' social realities along the path to superintendency, other studies highlight social constructionism and how knowledge is constructed through their careers.

In an in-depth case study conducted by McIlveen and Schultheiss (2012), the researchers explored two participants who achieved much more in their careers than "society might have typically expected of them" (p. 76). Through a small number of open-ended questions, the participants had the opportunity to reflect back on their experiences and how they impacted their socially constructed knowledge. One participant, Victoria (pseudonym), reflected on the major theme of her participation in the workplace. As an African American woman working in a profession dominated by White European American males, her opportunities to participate in the community were limited due to the culture shock experienced by co-workers. Eventually, Victoria increased her opportunity to participate socially within the community, and her opportunities for development and learning increased. Nevertheless, her knowledge construction was severely impacted in the early stages of her working life.

This is in strict contrast to the second participant, Heulwyn (pseudonym). As a White European female, she quickly moved from the periphery into full participation in the community practice of work. Heulwyn had a strong mentor who invited her to participate in meetings and learning as much as possible, first by observation and then by participation. This support through social interactions allowed Heulwyn to experience different roles in different settings, allowing her to make informed decisions about her future career. As a result of socially-constructed race, two participants with stark contrasts in social participation experienced different career progressions.

Bridgeman and De'ath (2017) conducted a small-scale empirical study to explore the value of a social constructionism approach that is underused in career research—that is, understanding the context upon which participants based their career development actions. The researchers selected 10 participants who had recently entered the public workforce from the university setting in order to explore their expectations of careers before they had worked for a substantial period of time. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the researchers determined participants' collective construction of career was heavily shaped by a range of context-specific interactions and influences. These included participants' ages, values, the location of their jobs, and their shared sense of national identity. Participants romanticized about starting at the bottom and working hard to move up the hierarchy to the top. The researchers stated that while the findings were not especially novel, social constructionism enabled a deeper insight into how context shaped understandings of career and how people draw on elements of the context collectively to develop meaning (Cohen & Duberley, 2015; McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2014).

Mentor Experiences

The placement in a constructed social network is easier to view in mentor relationships. A developmental network approach allows an opportunity to look at the interplay of relationships, while developmental relationships influence each other (Janssen, Vuuren, & Jong, 2016). “In a socially constructed world view, relationships are fundamental, since what we take to be real is an outcome of social relationships” (Gergen, 2009, p. 237). This social relationship and relational dynamic present help make sense of what is going on (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Mullen, Cox, Boettcher, and Adoue (2000) brought to light that mentorship is a construct and as such it does not have a real definition outside of the social context that created it. Mentorship is what it is because of how educators, as a social unit, have constructed its meaning. The socially constructed reciprocal relationships that are developed with mentors allow superintendents to make sense of their experiences, including successful impact or failure.

Moore (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study of 57 female superintendents in the state of California to look at the benefits of networking. The study involved the creation of a profile of the mentor and describing the mentor relationships with female superintendents. Through surveys and interviews, Moore found that building relationships, especially due to the inherent isolation of the position, was important to superintendents. These relationships came from formal networks, informal networks, and alternative networks. They also came from mentoring, which was recorded as the most beneficial for female superintendents in their first year of the job (72% cited mentoring as “extremely beneficial”) (p. 81). Overall, the mentoring experiences received were informal and provided opportunities to learn and expand on their experiences.

In Muir's (2014) qualitative case study of 25 participants and 11 mentor dyads in the Midwest, the inquiry focused on how participants' identities as leaders developed over time and the influences of formal mentoring programs on leadership identities. Participants were adults in non-leadership university programs. Through the analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews, three themes emerged from the data. The first was mentor partnership-leadership identity discovery in which participants, through participation, realized that he or she was a leader. The second was the leader identity development through critical learning moments in which participants believed that their mentors guided them through critical learning moments. This identity was developed through experiences, and participants mentioned how mentors drew out their knowledge through analysis of experiences. The last theme was leader identity development through self-knowledge, when participants began to increase their confidence. This resulted in participants "stepping up" and refining their sense of leadership. Overall, findings aligned with Day (2001), who affirmed leadership is constructed through social interactions within social environments. Consideration of organization context can provide insights into the various influences that developing leaders' experience in different settings.

A vast majority of superintendents began their leadership journey as teachers. Struyve, Daly, Vandecandelaere, Meredith, Hannes, and De Fraine (2016) focused their attention on the instructional and psychological conditions required to retain early career educators. Similar to findings regarding the experiences of early career superintendents, the researchers discovered the importance of being socially connected (social infrastructure) to other educators within the school setting. The benefits of being socially connected included a major positive effect on their retention rate, especially for early career educators, and also

for more experienced teachers. Struyve et al. contended that the evidence goes beyond stating that early career teachers need a social connection between mentor and mentee and that teachers need other social support. Teachers need social connectedness to have access to both instructional and affective relationships that will help them engage in the instructional core of being a teacher.

Twenty-first Century Leadership Experiences

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), which was reauthorized from No Child Left Behind (2001), places a continuing emphasis on increasing student achievement and higher school accountability. The Every Student Succeeds Act, a bipartisan measure, reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is the United States' national education law and long-standing commitment to equal opportunities for all students ("Every Student Succeeds Act: Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy," 2017). The ESSA changed the relationship between the Federal government and the state governments by reducing the federal role in education policy and curbing executive authority. Saultz, Fusarelli, and McEachin (2017) stated that the ESSA provides greater flexibility for state and local education leaders to do what they know is best for children while still maintaining those previous protections for economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. This legislation this requires twenty-first century educational leaders to continuously make improvement in their schools.

As a result of the requirements, educational leaders are constantly precipitating change and working with school staff to meet the goals and objective set forth before them. These goals and objectives, which will be further explored in Chapter 3, include securing

appropriate school funding, addressing marginalized school groups, and addressing trauma and mental health. Educational leaders and school communities must work together and focus on the art of learning (social constructionism) in order to engage in conversations to help accomplish the unique goals and objectives they face together in the twenty-first century.

Through this work experience, both educational leaders and school communities are learners who “make meaning or create understanding and knowledge during their interactions and experiences with others” (Longmore, Grant, & Golnaraghi, 2017, p. 6). Damşa, Kirschner, Andriessen, Erkens, and Sins (2010) contended that knowledge construction emphasizes that the learner is not the carrier of knowledge but is in charge of their own knowledge construction. Learners should generate and conceptualize new knowledge collaboratively. Aalst (2009) stated, “At moderate to high levels of engagement, knowledge construction can lead to the substantial restructuring of knowledge, which may include the invention of new concepts and enhanced meta-conceptual knowledge” (p. 261).

The social constructionism paradigm presents the concept of self which provides educational leaders a vehicle to explore the essence of meaning making in a social context. Social constructionist perspectives (Campbell, 2000; Gergen, 1999a) have influenced thinking about how leaders make sense of their own reality and how followers make sense of the leader. It brings together, with its resources, a fresh approach to organizational development where the focus is on people generating meaning together to create their organizational worlds (Celiane & Emerson, 2013). Through the creation of their organizational worlds, leadership is discursively constructed (Collinson, 2011), and the relational, contextual, and mundane are illuminated (Fairhurst, 2009). Aspiring

superintendents must make meaning of the context of the variety of leadership experiences by “not focusing on identifying attributes of individuals involved in leadership behaviors or exchanges, but rather on the social construction processes by which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 655).

While leadership theories can portray that the follower is a passive recipient of influence, this is not always the case. Meindle (1995) contended that the relationship between leaders and followers is primarily constructed and is heavily influenced by follower context and relationship. The view shifts the emphasis away from the leader’s behavior or personality. It instead focuses on how followers react to and are influenced by their construction of the leader rather than by another assessment of the leader. Campbell and Groenbaek (2006) stated that a fundamental assumption is that followers have a range of multiple realities constructed through which they view the leader in relation to one or more of the leadership discourses available within the organization. The lack of importance of the specific leadership behavior or exchange aligns with Bird and Wang’s (2013) study of 301 superintendents from eight states in the southeastern United States. Regardless of the leadership style chosen, the researchers found it was more important for leaders to be authentic in their interactions and their intentions. They determined that “Effective leaders need to respond to fast-changing conditions; strive to develop leadership talents within colleagues throughout their organizations; and do so through continuous *personal interactions* with diverse stakeholders” (p. 15).

The importance of leaders interacting with stakeholders was the focus of Ospina and Foldy’s (2010) study. The researchers drew on data from a national, multi-year, multi-modal narrative study of social change organizations and their leaders with a focus on how

communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership. The study included organizations that represented disenfranchised communities that had few resources at their disposal. The findings from the study identified five interconnected leadership practices which created conditions to bring diverse stakeholders together and facilitated their abilities for ongoing collaborative work: prompting cognitive shifts, naming and shaping identity, engaging in dialogue about difference, creating equitable governance mechanisms, and weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships. The researchers also found two assumptions that helped to give coherence to the bridge building work of leaders: the importance of minimizing power inequities and recognizing the strategic value of difference. Through listening and participation, study participants experienced cognitive shifts which resulted in experiencing deepened interpersonal relations among individuals from different social worlds.

Wallin and Crippen (2007) conducted a narrative qualitative study of nine superintendents to obtain data related to their leadership practices, experiences, and the effects of gender. The researchers utilized Vygotsky's (1978) four central ideas that knowledge is socially constructed, learning can lead development, development cannot be separated from its social context, and language plays a central role in development. Through the narrative data, the researchers focused on the dialogue of superintendents and whether the language illustrated particular gender assumptions regarding the leadership styles of superintendents. The researchers determined six topics of talk that emerged from the discourse on leadership style: stereotyping language, mixed messages, a blending of styles, isolation, women as dynamic leaders, and males as aggressors. Many of the participants' responses, both female and male, recognized that female superintendents faced gender bias

and the need to conform to the masculinized social constructions of leadership instead of a leadership style that focused on shared leadership. Dialogue regarding gender assumptions must be generated among superintendents so learning necessary to change social constructions regarding leadership styles can emerge (Clark, 2001).

Shields and Edwards (2005) stated, “[d]ialogic understanding holds rich promise for the unique context and goals of educational leaders. This promise arises from the development of new knowledge, new modes of reasoning, and the potential for mutual action” (p. 83). As twenty-first century leaders face and must overcome a variety of unique challenges, goals, and objectives, school communities must work together. Superintendents must understand these issues and also respond to each appropriately. Studying the manner in which superintendents respond, the decisions made, the importance of such choices, and the knowledge conveyed can be viewed using the different lenses of curriculum theory.

Curriculum Theory

As stated previously, curriculum theory is a distinctive field of study devoted to the interdisciplinary study of education (Pinar, 2004). Curriculum theory, which is concerned with creating educational environments that enhance the quality of experience, can quite plausibly be conceived as a discipline, rather than a subfield of another discipline (Tyler, 1970). Curriculum theory is dedicated to the study of educational experiences in the school curriculum and those educational experiences that accompany the curriculum. It is important to clarify that not every interdisciplinary study of educational experiences is curriculum theory, and likewise, not every instance of curriculum theory is interdisciplinary.

Pinar (2004) stated, “curriculum theory rejects the current ‘business-minded’ school reform, with its emphasis on test scores on standardized examinations, academic analogues

to ‘the bottom line’” (p. 16). While university level teachers have more academic freedom than public school teachers, both have limited opportunities for professionalization of academic freedoms (Burns, 2017; Nelson, 2010). This includes intellectual dissent, opportunities to be creative, less value for self-reflective practices, and restricted interdisciplinary erudition. Teachers should have the ability to have complicated conversations about curriculum with students so they have the ability to encounter themselves and the world they inhabit through academic knowledge and popular culture, and be grounded in their own lived experiences (Pinar, 2004). Perspectives within curriculum theory allow for scholarly inquiry within all education endeavors to understand curriculum across both school subjects (kindergarten through graduate school) and academic disciplines. School subject specializations within education focus on the actual teaching strategies employed by single teachers; curriculum theory focuses on trying to understand the overall significance of the curriculum and the relationships between the curriculum, the individual, and the larger society and its history.

Schubert, Lopez Schubert, Thomas, and Carroll (2002) stated that during the process of understanding curriculum, researchers must also consider the multitude of questions that have perplexed educators throughout history. These questions in regard to curriculum include: who decides what is worthwhile; why, where, when, how; and perhaps the most important question, for whose benefit? As a result, inquiry into curriculum includes a variety of perspectives and combinations: ethnography (Janesick, 2003), narrative or story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), artistic criticism (Eisner, 1991), biography (Kridel, 1998), phenomenological hermeneutics (Van Manen, 1997), revisionist history (Spring, 2006), speculative essay (Schubert, 1991), critical theory (Young, 2003), ideological analysis

(Apple, 2004), feminist studies (Lather, 1991), post-modernist renditions (Doll & Gough, 2002), and cultural studies (Edgerton, 1995). In addition, political (Carr & Hartnett, 2010), autobiographical (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), and phenomenological (Van Manen, 1997) are highly appropriate lenses as they focus on experiences and allow for a deepened understanding of participants' experiences. Overall, each perspective provides a lens for the researcher to view, question, and understand the existing curriculum.

Koselleck (2004) also emphasized that throughout this understanding, being cognizant of the layers of time is important to the experience. Each experience is a moment of time that is made up of the layers of past experiences, the present experiences, and horizons of the future. Linné (2015) gave attention to this understanding, as teachers' notions of their professional worlds can be viewed as layers of their past histories, professional experiences, communicative actions, and layers of agency, conceptions, and judgments once made. In their professional worlds, all these factors combine to become part of collective memories that might help the future. Perspective within the curriculum theory lens is appropriate in viewing superintendents' experiences, because curriculum theory is about discovering and articulating the educational significance of school subjects for self and for society.

Experiential Curriculum

Within curriculum theory is experiential curriculum, which can focus on the experiences of learning and teaching as curriculum. Experiential curriculum, focusing on learning, draws from experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) which was originally rooted in the work done by Dewey (1897) and Lewin (1951). Dewey (1915) drew attention to the process of learning by doing, which Wolfe and Byrne (1975) called "experiences-based

learning.” Hoover and Whitehead (1975) stated, “Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement” (p. 25).

Kolb (1984) built from this definition and stated that experience-based learning or experiential learning is when people learn through their discoveries and experiences. These discoveries shape the way in which people grasp their knowledge, and the experiences consequently affect cognitive development. This development is through a four-stage cycle of learning and through four different learning styles. Kolb (1984) contended that people’s learning can be classified in the stages of concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The learning styles can take place throughout the stages and consist of diverging (learning through different perspectives), assimilating (learning abstractly and reflectively), converging (learning through practical issues), and accommodating (learning through new challenges).

While this provides a lens through which to view experiential learning, experiential curriculum can also view experiences of teaching as curriculum. Through experiential learning, instructors act as “a guide, a cheerleader, a resource, and a support” but they serve as more than just deliverers of curriculum (Schwartz, 2012, p. 8). Through their own interactions, teachings, and experiences with students, teachers are actively involved with the students’ experiences and subsequent reflection on the experiences. Instructors grow and gain knowledge through the process and teaching. Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo (2000) pointed to the challenges to develop activities that effectively combine theory and experiential application, but when done, teachers evolve in their understanding and thinking

along with students. Instructors should allow students to take control of their own learning and work to move from an authoritarian influence to become “an integral member of the evolving group” and only intervene when the group lacks the skills to overcome or deal with an obstacle (Warren, 1995, p. 251). While using the different lenses within curriculum theory in this study, I also incorporated situational praxis to view curriculum implementation to provide another paradigmatic underpinning throughout the study.

Situational Praxis

Over the years, Aoki (2005) developed a phenomenological understanding focused on curriculum implementation in what he termed “situational praxis.” This idea of viewing curriculum was inspired by the methodology of phenomenological inquiry. In stark contrast to phenomenology, Aoki’s practice does not include elements of epoch (i.e., beliefs, theories, judgment, opinion), eidetic reduction, or transcendental reduction (Gallagher, 2012). The similar element is the nature of essence, as represented in the “is-ness” of the phenomena, which is created through the experiences of each human being resulting in a being-in-the-world. This essence refers to one or another fate invariant ontological-existential structures that allows meaning to emerge within our everyday ways of being. It is not related to platonic ideas or about the essentialist orientation in curriculum. To get to this everyday way of being, Aoki explored the human’s immersion in the process of education through primary and secondary modes. The first mode sought to reveal the thematic analysis of the basic ontological-existential meaning structures present below the surface of constructed epistemological, psychological, and social categories. The second mode of world discourse gave structure to humans’ understanding of the world without compromising it.

Situational praxis focuses on curriculum implementation, which provides an ontological-existential view of teaching, education, and learning (Magrini, 2015). Aoki (2005) noted that the problem with current curriculum design is the implementation and evaluation grounded in the analytic empirical orientation. This orientation provides a limited and reductive view of the human being and the world. Aoki labeled this view as Cartesian, in which current curriculum and education embrace the reductive view which implies that only analytic/empirical forms of knowledge are valuable. As opposed to aligning events and behaviors with predetermined goals and aims, the evaluation of the implemented curriculum in situational praxis consists of “examining the quality of the activity of discovering underlying assumptions, motives, perspectives, root metaphors, and implications for action to improve the human situation” (Aoki, 2005, p. 120).

The current era of curriculum implementation could be defined as instrumental action, in which curriculum is limited to second-order modes of world discourse. The United States, with both No Child Left Behind curriculum (reauthorized as Every Child Succeeds Act in 2015) and the Common Core State Standards curriculum are seated in the principle of instrumentalism (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Both curricula are technical in nature and favor modes of research that are analytic empirical (Howe, 2009). Instrumental action in curriculum is grounded in the educational goal of achieving the objectives for which the curriculum is conceived and constructed. Curriculum embraces a hierarchical approach to implementation in which superintendents, curriculum directors, consultants, or university scholars’ information agencies at different levels pass along a predetermined plan for teachers to implement with little to no autonomy (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). While primary focused on the K-12 educational system, instrumentalism curriculum reform has

also been proposed in higher education by Bradley, Seidman, and Painchaud (2012). Their three-year Integrated Competency-Based Model (ICBM) was aimed to function as a delivery system for predetermined competencies that students were expected to master in order to demonstrate readiness to graduate.

In order to deliver instrumental action, teachers participate in rote training professional development sessions or receive instructional packets on how to implement the curriculum. Curriculum in this view is dispensed by teachers and consumed by students. Evaluating the quality of teaching or the teacher is based on how faithfully the teacher implements and facilitates the prescribed curriculum. Curriculum deliverers' subjectivity in the process is inconsequential and their input/views hold little relevance in the process of implementation (Magrini, 2015). Privileging the curriculum-as-plan ignores the curriculum-as-enacted in the classroom, and beyond; thus, it ignores the lived-curricula of both teachers and students. The person's lived curriculum, which might be termed the "curriculum of life" (*curriculum vitae*), embodies the ontological potential for being-in-the-world, where unique and autonomous individuals, in community with others, seek to understand the world and live through interpretive activity, representing an authentic community of learning (Aoki, 2005).

Aoki (1991) presented one example of situational praxis within curriculum in action in his findings. Through two strands, the researcher draws out the theme (essence) of: to be educated is to experience tensionality. The first strand presented the enacted curriculum, as planned, as the first layer of the curriculum. The second strand focused on the lived experiences of teachers and students. From the analysis, Aoki explained the additional theme of inspired curriculum, based on the fact that students did not conform to the analytic-

empirical model of standardized curriculum. Instead, students resisted the unfolding curriculum and the teacher did not effectively “listen” to the students, which resulted in each participant experiencing a level of tension in their classes.

Using situational praxis as a lens through which to view superintendent experiences is appropriate and applicable for many reasons. The first is that all superintendents participated in education as students and as teachers (in most cases), which shaped their experiences and impressed the value of certain knowledge as they grew up. The era and age of the superintendent directly influenced their experiences as students and teachers. Focusing on professional or career experiences, a high percentage of superintendents began their careers in the classroom, serving as curriculum delivers to students. Due to the changing curriculum landscape throughout the past 50 years in the United States, using situational praxis as a lens through which to view professional curriculum experiences and twenty-first century leadership experiences with various curricula would be exhausting to cover. From the situational praxis standpoint or perspective, it is relevant to view higher education experiences and mentor experiences. Examining the quality of the activity or experience of the curriculum through these experiences allows the discovery of underlying assumptions, motives, perspectives, root metaphors, and implications.

Higher education experiences. University staff have had multiple roles within the institution consisting of teaching, research, and service. The percentage of time devoted in each role is different among universities, as well as in different disciplines. Universities with curricula for aspiring administrators at different levels formulate curricula to achieve the goals of the program: for graduates to pass certifications for their area. A coursework curriculum does not often focus on the lived experiences of its students. Rather, Lattuca and

Stark (2009) stated the academic plan at the university level is contextually influenced by external forces including the market, multiple levels of government, accrediting bodies, and disciplinary organizations. Internally, academic plans are shaped at the macro level by institutional mission, academic and support resources, and governance. At the unit level, there are considerations of content knowledge and norms, faculty expertise, and student characteristics. Indeed, as learning should be the principal outcome of a curricular plan. “whether a curriculum ‘works’ may depend on whether the plan adequately accounts for students’ goals and needs and addresses students’ preparation and ability” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 10).

Annala and Mäkinen (2013) conducted a reading of 62 articles over higher education curriculum published between 2004 and 2013. While the shared meanings were different, many articles took the concept of curriculum as self-evident. The term curriculum was used synonymously with teaching (Ahern, O’Connor, McRuairc, McNamara, & O’Donnell, 2012), programs (Alpay, 2013), scheduled activities (Le Riche, 2006) and course delivery (Armellini & Nie, 2013). A common theme between the articles was the suggestion that curriculum at the university level should be focused on the learning strategies that promote student-centered approaches to learning to achieve standards of competence. Annala and Mäkinen (2013) also concluded that there was a focus to shift the assessment system in favor of performance-based evaluations. This synthesized information is reflected by curriculum changing from one focused on passing the state certification to an assessment system based on performance.

To prepare leaders and aspiring leaders to perform on leadership assessments, higher education institutions have used selected curriculums to transmit the selected and valued

knowledge to students. Lamm, Sapp, and Lamm (2018) conducted a descriptive and causal quantitative comparison study to view the effects of participation in the LEAD21 leadership development program embedded in a higher education program. Through three different courses over three years and with 255 participants, the researchers sought to determine the extent to which leaders participating in the program improved their capacity to lead change. Overall, the aggregated data, from all three cohorts combined, indicated an average increase of 28.8%, which was statistically significant change. This indicated that the LEAD21 program did a very good job of increasing participants' leadership capacities. Leadership development programs such as LEAD21 provide an opportunity to supplement efforts to develop leaders to address change (Lamm, Lamm, Rodriguez, & Owens, 2016). Overall, leadership development curricula or programs work to develop capacity perspective for leaders. Sapp (2014) contended that through exposure, information, knowledge, and practice, leadership curricula can have a positive impact on leadership capacity.

Mentor experiences. Superintendents participate in formal and informal mentoring throughout their education careers. Porter, Youngs, and Odden (2011) indicated that while mentoring offers promise in reaching educational goals, mentor programs often rest on impoverished mentoring curriculum models. The researchers claim that mentors are usually based on lead teachers, a veteran teacher of the district, or a teacher who has a lot of seniority. While there is little research on mentor curriculum and its foundation, many programs do not articulate deliberate, conscious, and proactive approaches to developing mentors. Much of the literature on mentor curriculum consists of technical manuals and guidelines, which lack a coherent theoretical or research base (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). Mentor programs often assume good teachers make good mentors or good

administrators make good mentors who need little instruction to lead their charges. What is most absent from mentor curricula is the mentor null curriculum (Eisner, 1994). This null curriculum points to the theoretical dimension not explored and left out. An explicit and direct program takes away mentors as the experts and does not allow for two humans, the mentor and mentee, to sort out dilemmas of the world and interact through their experiences. In this way, learning may “not be controlled by corporate curriculum agenda, relying on outside experts and outside sources of knowledge” (de Laat & Schreurs, 2013, p. 1422). Rather, the knowledge should be negotiated and constructed through the mentor and mentee relationship.

Judd’s (2016) mixed method study researched the extent to which differences exist before and after completion of a mentor training program. Conducting questionnaire and surveys with over 150 participants in the K-12 setting, Judd found four major themes: applicability, development, transferability, and productivity. Within applicability, participants pointed to the relevant curriculum, learning outcomes, activities, and mentor relationships that all worked in concert to provide an applicable course of study. One recurring piece throughout the study was how experiences played a role in the mentors’ training and how those experiences “calibrate future action with emerging insight” (Judd, 2016, p. 39). The curriculum utilized with the participants allowed knowledge to be selected, valued, and organized for the mentors and mentees, but study participants did not question the curriculum presented to them.

Bowser, Hux, McBride, Nichols, and Nichols (2014) conducted a study of the Arkansas State University educational leadership curriculum. The researchers focused on portfolios of 311 graduates (73 superintendent candidates, 187 principal candidates, and 51

curriculum director candidates), which was the end product of the program. The educational leadership program selected relied heavily on site-based mentors who collaborated with their protégés to identify and provide authentic activities in the school setting. The student created portfolios that contained the following: candidate's resume, graduate transcript, teaching license, a mentor participation agreement, completion of internship activity log (350 hours of school-based activities), a minimum of 35 internship artifacts supported with reflections, program assignments supported with reflections, and a program evaluation completed by the candidate. Mentors in the study appeared to be dedicated to furthering the profession of educational leadership. Each demonstrated the willingness to collaborate and oversee their protégé toward the completion of activities required of their capstone projects. Overall, the study worked to understand the significance of the curriculum and the relationship between the curriculum, the mentor, and the mentee.

Twenty-first century leadership experiences. Superintendents in the twenty-first century face the challenge of preparing their students to be successful and to meet the current demands. No Child Left Behind (2001) predicted that transparency spotlights on effective educational practices would encourage less effective public schools and school systems to copy more successful peers, producing better and more equitable academic outcomes (Kress, Zechmann, & Schmitten, 2011). With the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act, although it somewhat decreased federal oversight, it seems unlikely to remove these pressures. In order to continue to improve and provide academic equity, superintendents can develop or adopt a curriculum focused on developing twenty-first century skills or competencies. Dede (2010) described the main difference between twentieth-century skills and twenty-first-century skills as stemming from the new

technology and information available via the internet. Students are required not only to use technology in their careers, but to also mine massive amounts of information now available to them. Trilling and Fadel (2009) echoed this emphasis of future skills, claiming twenty-first century skills as necessary in order to prepare citizens who are able to face the challenges of a global society, able to be innovative in order to solve complex problems, and use the power of technology to change the world for the better.

Curriculum adoption does not necessarily mean students are receiving a poor education; rather it is a change from the same education that was received by students 50 to 100 years ago (Wagner, 2010). While superintendents are not required to be experts in curriculum, instruction, and assessment in all subjects and for all grade levels, they are a leading force of the district with the power to initiate change. Paige (2009) stated that adopting a twenty-first century curriculum should blend knowledge, thinking, innovation skills, media, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy, and real-life experience in the context of core academic subjects. Curriculum should focus on the construction of knowledge and encourage students to produce valued information that has meaning to them in order to develop new skills (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). In order for students to be prepared with the necessary knowledge and life skills to be successful in their future career, they must have critical skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration (Lombardi, 2007).

Voogt and Roblin (2012) conducted a comparative analysis of twenty-first century frameworks to better understand what curricular integrations twenty-first century skills require from schools and education systems. The researchers synthesized literature from 59 documents pertaining to twenty-first century competencies, which included working papers,

international standards, international studies, and progress reports on initiatives. Through the analysis to identify similarities and differences between the frameworks (horizontal consistency) and the coherence between intentions, implementation, and assessment of outcomes (vertical consistency), three major themes were constructed. The first theme, definition of twenty-first century competencies, determined the need for competencies in the areas of communication, collaboration, information and communications technology, and social and/or cultural awareness. Creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and the capacity to develop relevant and high-quality products were also regarded as important competencies by most frameworks. Implementation issues, the second theme, highlighted how the curriculum frameworks struggled to define their role and place within school curriculums. The last theme, assessment, focused on how, after the implementation of a new curriculum or framework, a need arises for new teaching and assessment measures.

These three themes were echoed in McPhail's (2016) three-year empirical study of a newly opened secondary school which implemented a twenty-first century vision and curriculum. The approach to the school consisted of open-plan, flexible learning environments that also focused on the development of student competencies through personalized learner-centered pedagogy, a central role for technology, and a creative approach to curriculum design. Through interviews, observations, and documents (school policies, written records, student work), the researcher focused on the relationship between curriculum design, conceptual progression, and student learning. The findings from the study suggest that with an innovative curriculum, teachers must confront the link between curricular concepts, content, pedagogy, and student data more deeply than a traditional school structure, which might simply roll over what has been done before.

Hubbard, Datnow, and Pruyne (2014) conducted a yearlong case study of an elementary school utilizing data and new reform initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for all students. While teachers and the principal used data to make informed decisions, the researchers looked at how teacher-implemented data was used in concert with the twenty-first century curriculum initiatives (Project Based Learning and the International Baccalaureate Program). Through interviews with staff and observations of teacher meetings, the data from the study revealed that instructional planning occurred in language arts and math, but not in other subjects. While teachers effectively performed systematic reviews in two subjects using data, they struggled to meet the needs of students in science and social studies due to the design of the project-based learning units. Upon further review, the researchers concluded that all teachers needed more support to effect change, and the principal was constricted in her ability to provide guidance. Teachers and principals needed the knowledge and resources in order to effectively implement the new multiple initiatives. Overall, superintendents need to effectively prepare the students in their districts with the skills needed to be successful in the twenty-first century. As leaders, they have the power to select and drive curriculum initiatives to positively effect change.

Conclusion

This theoretical framework comprised of social constructionism and different curriculum theory perspectives were applied to higher education, professional experiences, mentoring, and twenty-first century leadership. Viewing superintendent experiences through the lens of social constructionism allows multiple realities to be examined through the social construction of their lived experiences. Using different perspectives within curriculum theory, specifically using political, autobiographical, and phenomenological curriculum

theories, I had the opportunity to study superintendents' educational experiences and question how their knowledge was transmitted, selected, valued, and organized. Finally, situational praxis provided a lens through which to view curriculum implementation, an ontological-existential view of teaching, education, and learning through two layers. The first layer was the curriculum as planned, and the second layer focused on the lived experiences of teachers and students. For many superintendents who began their professions as teachers, the planned curriculum includes curriculum that focuses on such constituents as board members, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and multiple stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels. The perspectives of social constructionism and different lenses of curriculum theory provided a sound paradigmatic underpinning for this study.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

School superintendents face a variety of distinct and varied challenges in an ever-changing age as they aim to lead organizations toward success. These superintendents must be equipped with an overabundance of skills to lead these districts through the inherent challenges and the complexities of the job. Educational leaders are not adequately prepared to assume responsibility of most districts, resulting in short tenures in the position and superintendents persistently moving from district to district or into retirement (Grissom, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Inadequacy of mentoring, higher education preparation, and on-the-job training opportunities do not prepare superintendents for the complexities and stressors of the position, resulting in a limited number of high-quality candidates to fill the future void of superintendents. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the meaning of preparation for the position of superintendent in Midwestern school districts. To explore issues that may affect superintendents' feelings of preparedness, it is necessary to understand the different experiences superintendent may have regarding this position.

To foster an understanding of the events and programs superintendents experienced in their preparation for the position, the review of literature is divided into the following topics: (a) career pathways for the role of superintendent; (b) higher education; (c) mentoring; and (d) twenty-first century leadership. Each topic in the literature review is viewed through the lenses of social constructionism and curriculum theory. According to Mertler (2016), a literature review is “a comprehensive examination of the information and knowledge base related to a given research topic” (p. 66). In an effort to examine the

information and knowledge in the areas of superintendent preparedness, I performed literature searches online and offline. The following words and terms were used in different combinations throughout my searches: mentoring, mentors, educational mentoring, superintendent mentoring, superintendent graduate experiences, higher education, superintendent careers, superintendent previous jobs, twenty-first century leadership, and superintendent leadership. I primarily used the databases of Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), WorldCat Discovery, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. These data bases presented thousands of results depending on the specific search terms used. In an effort to narrow down results further, advanced searches presented only results published in English and available in full text. To look at the historical events of preparedness, no time period was specified in the search. In an effort to present empirical studies that were timely and relevant, searches were limited to results published in the last ten years.

First, I present literature on career pathways and positions held prior to that of superintendent. I cover the importance and the experiences unique to each position. Second, I cover the higher education pathways that superintendents take on their way to the position. I also discuss their varied experiences in leadership preparation programs as they learned and trained to become educational leaders. Third, I discuss mentoring and its use throughout history and other organizations that have implications for superintendency mentoring. I then examine how mentoring started in the field of education, its utilization at different levels, what characteristics are important in the mentor relationship, and training for mentors. I conclude the literature review with a discussion of twenty-first century leadership. Superintendents must adapt to the changing school landscape and have the necessary leadership skills to take on the unique challenges presented to them.

Career Pathway Experiences

Superintendents have a variety of career experiences that prepare them for their future as a superintendent. Traditional superintendents typically have a similar career trajectory beginning with classroom teaching, move on to become a building administrator, then a central office administrator (if in a large district), and then finally ascend to the position of superintendent. Throughout these positions, aspiring superintendents gain valuable knowledge and insight into educational leadership that will serve them in their final position. While this career path is typical of public education superintendents, with the prevalence of charter schools in the United States, some attention is due to the unique demands placed on charter school superintendents. Lastly, not all superintendents come from a background of education; some enter from the fields of business, law, politics, or the military. While these nontraditional superintendents have followed a uniquely different path compared to a traditional superintendent, the demands placed upon each are the same.

Positions in Education

Previous career experience within the field of education is common for superintendents. Studies and other research to date examining factors related to administrator career behavior are limited and tend to focus on entry into the profession rather than moves within it. According to Brunner and Grogan (2005), most superintendents begin as teachers in the classroom. Research suggests that there is no set professional pathway to the superintendency, but many successful classroom teachers use their experience as a foundation for school leadership (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009). Some states, such as Indiana, require a minimum of two years teaching experience but no prior administrative experiences to hold the position of superintendent. The classroom teaching

experience offers a position in which real learning can happen in a wide variety of areas. It is also in the classroom that teachers learn what truly matters in a school district; teaching is where aspiring leaders can learn the basic skills necessary for most administrative positions.

Callan and Levinson (2011) reaffirm that the pathway to the superintendency begins with classroom teaching and also state that following success in their classroom teaching, these pre-superintendents typically obtain their administrative degree/certification to move to a principal or central/district office position. This trajectory generally involves “mentors and networking [that] are often key elements along the career path to the superintendency” (p. 13). Apple (2013) references the disparity in the number of female teachers to male as well as that ratio on the administrative side. Apple (2013) notes, “While the overwhelming majority of schoolteachers are women (a figure that becomes even higher in the primary and elementary schools), many more men are heads or principals of primary and elementary schools despite the proportion of women teachers” (p. 168).

Kowalski et al.’s (2011) survey of over 1,800 current superintendents found that around 45% of superintendents started off as high school teachers, followed by 22% as elementary school teachers and 20% as middle school teachers. Other than special education teachers at eight percent, counselors, therapists, college teaching, and other were listed around one percent. Non-teaching background was reported as one percent of the respondents. The researchers also sought out answers to how many years superintendents stayed in the classroom before moving on to another position. The majority of respondents, around 38%, stayed in the classroom between six and ten years. The next 23% of respondents stayed in the classroom one to five years, followed by 20% remaining in the classroom between 11 and 15 years. From these positions, superintendents were reported as

moving into their first administrative positions, which was likely to be assistant principal for most and the principalship for others.

Although aspiring teachers typically prepare themselves for the principalship through preparation programs and advanced degrees in order to obtain appropriate licensure, they do not always pursue the position. Hancock and Bird (2008) found that there were three factors that diminished the attractiveness of the principalship. The first factor was reported as insufficient gains or personal benefits from the principal position. This included the increase in time-consuming responsibilities, the loss of tenure, the increase in dealing with bureaucracy, and the minimal salary differential when all factors were taken into consideration. The second factor was personal needs and issues including the potential need to relocate and a negative impact on quality family time/life resulting from an increased workload. The last factor was an increase in job risks. With the new job there was an increase in the pressure for accountability, potential litigation and legal issues, conflict with different educational stakeholders, and trying to address multiple contradictory expectations with the limited resources provided to them. These three factors all contributed to successful teachers' limited interest in pursuing further career advancement. Gajda and Militello (2008) also noted that prospective school leaders in Massachusetts reported stress, salary, and time demands as the three top reasons they chose not to pursue principal positions.

Building level administrators. Those who choose to continue along the career path often pursue positions of assistant principal or head principal. The role of principal allows pre-superintendents to gain knowledge and skills specific to educational administration. While many in their teaching position hone their instructional teaching skills, principals must develop their instructional leadership skills to support effective teaching practices.

With national and state expectations requiring schools to achieve mastery in a variety of curriculum objects, “leading instructional efforts in a school have evolved into a primary role for school principals” (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008, p. 3). Within the school, the influence of principals is second only to teachers in affecting student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals must develop human resource skills to select, support, and retain qualified teachers and staff members within the school organization to accomplish the building goals.

While there is a new focus on increasing the accountability and student achievement of schools, school management duties have not decreased and remain time-consuming responsibilities (Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004; Lashway, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003). Management duties include the organizational management that provides the foundation for teaching and learning. Other skills principals develop in the position are effective communication and community relations. Principals today function in an environment that requires constant attention to the needs of internal and external constituents (Stronge et al., 2008). As those members of the learning community become increasingly more involved in education, principals find themselves accountable to policymakers, parents, and business leaders for the results of their schools (Catano & Stronge, 2007).

The research that specifically focus on the careers of administrators is relatively small but dates back to the 1980s. Blumberg and Greenfield’s (1986) study examined the work and lives of principals, building on Schein’s (1978) concept of career. This research was focused on the stages of administrators’ careers and how their career pathways were shaped by work, self-development, and the non-work dimensions of the administrators’ lives

(Greenfield, 1984, 1985). More recent research conducted by Oplatka (2004) applied career stages to leadership perspectives and noted which perspectives focused on each stage of development (induction, establishment, maintenance versus renewal, and disenchantment).

In an embedded case study conducted by Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch (2011), the researchers presented qualitative evidence on the processes and forces that shape the career paths of school administrators. Conducting semi-structured interviews with 48 principal and assistant principals, they sought to not only discover the processes in which career decisions were made but also those forces that shaped those processes. In regard to administrator career transitions, the researchers constructed five different moves (Farley-Ripple et al.). The first transition, and the most common move, was of self-initiation where administrators decided to apply for a position as a natural progression or a long-standing goal. The researchers found that administrators were the primary decision makers, particularly when entering administration positions. The second transition was recruiting/tapping, a common circumstance surrounding moves as administrators were recruited by fellow leaders for specific positions. The third transition, less commonly cited by participants, involved superintendents' request that administrators move. This included filling positions as an interim administrator, filling a hard to staff position, or filling an undesirable role. The last two transition factors were removing and passing over. In these cases, the participants responded that they were removed from the position with non-renewal of their contracts (blaming personality conflicts or politics). In situations where they applied for open positions, participants were passed over and remained at the school, not by choice.

In another study, Kelsey, Allen, Coke, and Ballard (2014) focused on preparing female school administrators for the position of school superintendent in Texas. Twenty

participants were identified from a pool of 278 female superintendents, and 60-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted. When asked about their professional goals prior to their superintendency, almost all of the participants responded with wanting to be a teacher or a teacher leader, and seven stated they aspired to be building principals. Not one participant aspired to become a superintendent. When asked about the barriers they faced before assuming the role, common themes were stereotypes of women, the “good ol’ boy” system, and the short or long-term goals of the system. The researchers concluded that networking with other people, staying current in the field, and leading by servant leadership were strategies aspiring female superintendents could use to develop leadership skills and self-confidence for the position.

District level administrators. While classroom teaching provides an instructional career position for superintendents and holding building administration positions allows aspiring superintendents to learn organizational management, central office or district office administration is yet another career position pre-superintendents may hold before transitioning to superintendent. Due to the wide range of school district sizes and positions within a school organization, superintendent pathways may differ more at this position. Ortiz (1982) in an early report suggested that because of the absence of central administration in small districts, the common career pattern for the superintendency in small districts was teacher, principal, and then superintendent rather than the path of larger districts, which was teacher, principal, central office administrator, and then superintendent.

Some positions in the school organization are in the line hierarchy positions directly below that of the superintendent. These positions include associate superintendents, deputy superintendents, and assistant superintendents. Those with the titles of director, coordinator,

consultant, or manager are considered outside of the line hierarchy (Kim & Brunner, 2009). These positions are outside of the hierarchy line because those that hold the position may not have the required administrative credentials, thus making theirs a staff position (Kim & Brunner, 2009). In such positions as deputy superintendent, associate superintendent, and assistant superintendent, aspiring superintendents expand their organizational leadership skills. These skills, depending on the position, can include working with principals to improve instruction, supporting other administrators with resources (e.g., including professional development trainings), reorganizing/managing other central office units, providing stewardship, and gathering and using information to guide the vision/mission of the school district (Wallace Foundation, 2010).

Reviewing the background of those who obtained central office positions, it is clear the gender difference played a role in the pathway of aspiring superintendents (Björk, 2000; Glass, 2000). The structures of the careers of women tend to be based in the elementary setting (as teachers and building administrators), rather than at the secondary level, which might have hindered their visibility as leaders. This different track of working in the elementary setting may obstruct and present a lack of opportunities in the central office setting. Brunner and Grogan (2005) indicated that women administrators have stronger occupational aspirations and even preferences for educational leadership positions. In addition, Kim and Brunner (2009) stated, “more women administrators experience mentorships than men administrators—experiences that support women’s self-perceptions and socialization regarding their career development—a fact that fails to provide fuller explanations of gender disparities in higher levels of school administration” (p. 76).

Kowalski et al.'s (2011) nationwide survey of superintendents found that current superintendents in the larger school district category (3,000–24,999 and 25,000 or more) were more likely than peers in the smaller category (fewer than 300 and 300–2,999) to have had experience in a district level position. The researchers explain that this might be due to the lack of positions at the central office level in smaller districts compared to those in larger districts. Looking at the range of administrative positions held before assuming the role of superintendent, this data could explain why high school principal, at 47%, was the most commonly held position before becoming a superintendent. This was followed by district level director/coordinator at 44%, elementary school principal at 40%, middle school principal at 38%, and finally assistant/associate/deputy superintendent at 37%. These results are echoed by Glass and Franceschini (2006), who found that central office administrators were hired around 65% of the time from the largest school districts to assume the role of superintendent.

Although previous roles are crucial in preparing superintendents, their experiences in those roles are significant as well. Freely and Seinfeld (2012) examined the superintendent pathways of retired superintendents to gain insight into the positions critical in their preparation; they found that the specific position the superintendent held before did not impact their preparation as much as their broad and diverse experiences within those positions. The findings also indicated that the experiences prepared the superintendents for success only because they built on their already existing personal qualities. These qualities included: vision, commitment, relationship building, a strong work ethic, a concern for their work and work for other people, and courage. Seinfeld (2010) made the recommendations for aspiring superintendents to have the courage to make career moves to gain the requisite

diverse experiences and develop relationships with mentors in order to access the superintendency.

Superintendents. When applying for the position of superintendent, Sharp and Walter (2009) pointed to the wide variety of sources to aid in finding an open superintendent position: university placement offices, school board associations, superintendent associations, professional search firms, and personal contacts. While some would assume those already working within the school district might have a better chance of assuming the role, Kowalski et al. (2011) found that only around 39% of internal candidates are hired to lead their districts. This is echoed by Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) who stated, “Internal candidates experience mixed results in successfully attaining the superintendency” (p. 36). The determining factor to hire and promote within the school district might stem from the decision to continue the status quo. If that is the case, internal candidates might have higher preference over outside employees. Promotions within the district also have shown to improve employee morale (Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents in larger school districts (over 25,000 students) were more likely than peers to be promoted internally (Kowalski et al., 2011).

The search process on the side of the school district might take a variety of different formats. Usually, school districts and boards of education will consider the input of other parties or stakeholder groups during the hiring process, which can include multiple and diverse interviews (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009). Once a candidate is selected, the board of education negotiates a contract and the superintendent is hired. Those who apply and ascend to the position of superintendent obtain the position quite quickly. Glass, Björk, and Brunner’s (2000) survey of superintendents found that around 56% of superintendents

applied and found a job within a year. That percentage rose to 67% a decade later, regardless of the school district size (Kowalski et al., 2011)

Historically, superintendents hired fit the profile of a White male, between the ages of 56 and 60, who are married (Kowalski et al., 2011). This might be reinforced by school boards who hire superintendents who they deem “look right” and “fit” (Kelsey et al., 2014); as a result, limited diversity within the position exists. Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) found that five percent of superintendents nationwide identified in a category other than White (not Latinx) which grew to six percent in Glass and Franceschini’s nationwide study of superintendents in 2006. Kowalski et al. (2011) pointed out that the numbers dropped in 2010 to just under six percent. The Council of the Great City Schools (2008) states that 42% of their superintendents identify as Black, and an additional 10% identify as Latinx. Simmons (2005) points to the fact that superintendents of color face several challenges beyond those facing other superintendents. One challenge is accessing the superintendency. Another challenge is that superintendents of color are often employed in problem ridden, low-performing school districts.

Those assuming the position of superintendent are also usually male. While males have historically held the position of superintendent, over the past 30 years, the percentage of female superintendents has grown steadily. In 1982 there were reportedly only around one percent of female superintendents, which rose to almost 15% in 2000, then rose again to around 25% in 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011). This growth is still in stark contrast to the make-up of public education in which the clear majority of educators are female. The National Center of Education Statistics revealed that in 2011, around 76% of educators were women. Grogan and Brunner (2005) stated that while males lead more schools in the United

States than women, woman largely outnumber men as classroom teachers. Also, according to Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), the number of women achieving a superintendent position does not match the number of certified and qualified woman aspiring to the superintendency. Women who attained the position of superintendent, on average were older and twice as likely to have more than 20 years of teaching experience, compared to male peers (Kowalski et al., 2011). An existing stereotype is that successful leaders should portray masculine behaviors of authority and discipline, whereas women are considered to be emotional and collaborative (Krüger, 2008).

As previously discussed, classroom teaching is the one of the first steps for aspiring superintendents; providing the foundation for gaining access to building level administration and possibly district level administration before assuming the position of superintendent. This brief overview of the literature and research on the career path to superintendency is typically situated within public education, but not all superintendents work in public education. Superintendents also serve as the head of charter school organizations. While there are scarce literature and studies regarding career pathways of charter school superintendents, the next section briefly highlights the development of charter schools and the myriad challenges unique to charter school superintendents.

Charter Schools

Charter schools were initially conceived by Professor Ray Budde of Massachusetts in 1988. The idea originated as an extreme free-market option to vouchers when it was noted that many parents were spending their state funding at religious schools. Later in 1991, Minnesota became the first state to allow charter schools, with other states following suit soon after. In 2016-2017, there were more than 6,900 charter schools in the United States

that enrolled an estimated 3.1 million students. This is a sharp increase in enrollment over the last decade from 1.2 million students in 2006-2007 (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2018).

Charter schools are a unique kind of public education that are publicly funded but privately managed. Private organizations contract with local government agencies to run the school. Each state has its own rules regarding who can apply and be granted a charter to open a school. Some states reserve this decision at the state level, while other local governments, individual schools, and even colleges/universities have the power to issue charters. Those that apply for charters range from parents, community members, non-profit organizations, and even for-profit organizations. Each charter school has set terms the organization must follow in operating the school, which usually include academic standards, goals or performance standards, and other aims the issuing body deems necessary. These terms have a set period of time in which they will be reviewed and issued again or, in some cases, closed by the agency that issued the charter for failure to meet the terms or if the charter comes financially insolvent.

As publicly funded schools, charters receive per-student operating funds from the state just like public schools but also receive grants, financial awards, and donations. Charter schools are free and may not restrict who can apply to attend to the school, much like public schools, but they do tend to target certain communities or try to recruit students with specific experiences or interests. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) asserted charter schools enroll more students who are at risk for dropout and eligible for free and reduced lunch than public schools; and, as such, require more supports and interventions. These supports are delivered in the classroom by teachers who may not be certified to teach,

depending on the state. While teaching requirements vary for charter schools, so do the requirements for superintendents and their job duties.

Superintendents. Given the limited research available regarding the superintendents' career paths in public education, it is even more scarce for superintendents serving in charter schools. Those governing charter schools have the ability to hire superintendents from the public education sector and the career path previously stated or they can select non-traditional superintendents (which will be discussed later in this section). This freedom of selection allows charter schools to find the right fit for their school system. Milliman, Maranto, and Wood (2015) conducted a case study of Arizona's K-12 charter schools, specifically looking at superintendent salary fluctuations. Examining 104 traditional public school districts, the researchers conducted complex regression models to determine salary changes. The findings point to the public education school boards trying to keep their superintendents in place rather than lose them to newly opened charter schools. The researchers found that while veteran and successful superintendents did receive a pay raise, the highest pay raises were given to superintendents from low-test scoring districts. They believed that with less tenure, those superintendents may have left the job to receive higher pay at new charter schools. School boards and school districts want to keep their superintendents rather than lose them to charter schools.

Regardless, assuming the position of superintendent within a charter school offers a variety of obstacles different from those experienced by public education superintendents. The need to equip leaders for traditional public schools in districts is as great as it is for public charter schools (Lookabaugh, 2014). A major issue regarding charter school superintendents is the lack of access to information and resources that specifically address

charter schools. In reviewing the job descriptions of public charter school superintendents, it is typical to combine the administrative, instruction, and political leadership roles of traditional public school district superintendents. Charter school superintendents need greater awareness of all implications and multidimensional aspects for leading these unique public schools (Olivarez, 2013). Many times, the charter school superintendent faces extreme obstacles as he or she attempts to legitimize the charter school as part of the community and to fulfill the needs of the community it serves (Dunn, 2011). For example, working with a different student population and keeping their needs in mind, the charter school superintendent must manage transportation to the school, employing master schedules that enable students to ride public buses or support transportation with the school's budget.

Besides the difference in job responsibilities, there is also a difference in priorities. While public school superintendents have a firm income base on which to establish a budget, charter schools' finances fluctuate depending on student enrollment. Purcell (2017) conducted interviews of four charter school superintendents in Texas and findings suggested all four superintendents spoke of finance as "specifically being the most crucial sub function for ensuring the viability of their charter school" (p. 127). Another difference in the priorities is job security. The superintendent's job is lost if the charter is revoked and the school shut down. While mismanagement, academic failures by students, facilities issues, and district obstacles are the top reasons charters fail, only 15% of charter schools fail for any reason (Consoletti, 2011). In a 2009 Stanford study of 16 charter schools, the researchers found that even when a charter school is failing, the charter schools "often have powerful and persuasive supporters in their communities who feel that shutting down this

school does not serve the best interests of currently enrolled students” (Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, p. 8).

Although all superintendents must be advocates for their school(s), charter school superintendents must deal with those who are outspoken against charter schools. The proponents of charter schools cite a lack of achievement compared to public schools and the money taken out of public schools is harmful. Grant (2010) found that only 17% of charter schools performed better than their public school equivalents, 37% delivered results that were significantly worse, and in the other half, there was no significant difference. Similarly, Arsen and Ni’s (2011) Michigan study disclosed that charter school competition had remarkably little impact on the standard measures of district resources used in the schools.

This section specifically highlighted charter schools, the roles of charter school superintendents, and the lack of research related to previous positions held by charter school superintendents. While some research suggests that charter schools draw their superintendents from the public school pipeline, not all superintendents follow the traditional teacher, principal, central office position, superintendent career pathway. The Council of Great City Schools (2014) collected survey data from 53 of the 66 Council of Great City Schools member districts, which showed approximately eight percent of the superintendents did not work in the education sector prior to their appointments. The next section highlights the career pathway of those who enter the position of superintendency from outside education and who might be considered non-traditional superintendents.

Non-Traditional Superintendents

In some cases, and becoming more frequent with higher demands placed on superintendents, school boards and hiring agencies reach out to those outside of education to

become the leader of the school system. As school districts and their boards are pressured to produce higher test scores with greater accountability, some school districts choose to solve the perceived crisis by hiring leaders in the business, political, or military field. In 2003, The Broad Foundation's *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto* argued that school districts should search outside of the traditional superintendent to hire their leaders. These non-traditional superintendents often do not hold an education or curriculum/pedagogy degree, training, or licensure/certification from a college or university and have not performed significant duties and responsibilities within educational settings (Duckworth, 2008).

Glass and Franceschini's (2006) national survey of 1,200 current superintendents found that 103 superintendents took non-traditional pathways to the position. With a clear focus on non-traditional superintendents, they found that 76 of the 103 served in school districts smaller than 3,000 students. Forty of the 103 superintendents also indicated that they were from the business field. Glass and Franceschini noted that these nontraditional superintendents were probably from law, military, or a private business sector. They noted that elected officials could also be included in this number, especially in the south, where some local school districts hold elections for the position. Kowalski et al. (2011) conducted a comparable nationwide survey of over 1,800 superintendents which excluded a defined focus on non-traditional superintendents. While they did not directly focus on non-traditional superintendents, the researchers discovered that only 46 of the 1,800 superintendents reported they came from a field other than education.

While these statistics highlight the prevalence of nontraditional superintendents throughout the nation, it is also important to highlight where they serve. Eisinger and Hula

(2004) noted that the non-traditional superintendent is more likely to be found in larger school districts where reform is needed to address a variety of issues. Eisinger and Hula reported that the average size of an urban school district led by a non-traditional superintendent was about 83,000 students, but for non-urban school districts, the student population is around 185,000 students. Coupled with the school district size is the student population makeup. Non-traditional superintendents tend to lead districts that have a higher percentage of free and reduced lunch, predominantly African American and Latinx students. The researchers found that on average, at least half of the students were from low socioeconomic conditions as opposed to the districts of traditional superintendents, who serve a population of around 37% in low socioeconomic conditions.

School boards that hire non-traditional superintendents are those that are struggling and want to bring in a new perspective to persistent problems that those before them could not solve (Quinn, 2007). Non-traditional superintendents often hail from results-oriented district environments, where excuses are not accepted (Hernandez, 2010). As a result, they often are not limited by traditional views of education. While non-traditional superintendents continue to lead districts, a search for research focused on their role returned limited results. Non-traditional superintendent effectiveness is mixed, with more information available about the failures of non-traditional superintendents compared to their success (Houston, 2006).

Support. Many believe that as the highest power in the school system, the board of education or school board should have the final decision regarding hiring superintendents. This is coupled with the support for non-traditional superintendents, which stems from the perspective that they will be more comfortable with achievement measures and

accountability due to their non-education backgrounds (Mathews, 2001). From their non-education backgrounds, success is usually assessed or measured by quantifiable indicators, which makes them more comfortable with the high pressure of accountability. English (2003), along with other education reformers, advocated that there are competent executives in business, the military, and from political fields ready to assume the position of superintendent, but traditional requirements hold them back. These requirements include certification and licensure requirements which are discussed further in the next section.

Those that support non-traditional superintendents propose that larger districts should hire multiple district-level administrators to manage the educational side of the organizations, and as a result, non-traditional superintendents can be hired. This idea is echoed in Pascopella's (2011) interview with Dan Domenech (then the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators), who conceded that business leaders or CEOs of school districts can lead if they have a deputy or assistant who can run the instructional side of the district. He cited New York City Schools as a district which employed such tactics. Other school districts which have or currently follow this pattern include Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

Novak (2012) interviewed five non-traditional superintendents to examine perceptions of role differentiation between non-traditional and traditional superintendents, the factors that create a need for non-traditional superintendents, barriers/disadvantages encountered by non-traditional superintendents, reasons why urban school districts hire more non-traditional superintendents than do suburban or rural schools, and similarities of non-traditional superintendents with community college leaders. A major perception related to the positions of non-traditional superintendents was that their extensive finance, budget,

and leadership experiences will benefit the school districts more than related experiences of traditional superintendents. Also, Novak found that non-traditional superintendents believed that when they became more knowledgeable about the challenges facing the district and school context, they will transition to become effective school leaders.

Opposition. While there are handful of policy makers and educators that support non-traditional superintendents, they are often wary of their levels of effectiveness to lead school organizations. Even though policy makers and practitioners want to expand the leadership pipeline, not all agree that those from outside education can successfully lead (Aarons, 2010). Many professional organizations believe that non-traditional superintendents cannot lead school districts and will inevitably fail. Houston (2006) stated:

Do you want a Taco Bell superintendent or somebody who has actually run a school? Do you want chalupas with those test scores? If the business of education is teaching and learning, shouldn't the head have some background in teaching and learning? Without institutional knowledge, nontraditional candidates are at greater risk of failing. That's one reason the American Association of School Administrators took a position against alternative superintendents last year. (p. 8)

With school districts having an increase in accountability and demand for results, districts want superintendents with pedagogical backgrounds who have the necessary educational background. Glass (2003) also found that in describing the skills and knowledge of a superintendent, a majority of school boards are reluctant to hire non-traditional superintendents.

Fusarelli (2006) conducted a case study of a non-traditional superintendent with a military background in a small school district which had a recent history of unsuccessful, short-tenured traditional superintendents. The board of education hoped to try a different approach. The researcher's case study chronicled the non-traditional superintendent's

failures to unite opposing groups, to understand the community in which he worked, and his reluctance to take advice from career educators. From the beginning of his tenure as superintendent, there was an ongoing clash of leadership styles between him and the board of education as well as with other educators. Fusarelli found that when the superintendent was unwilling or unable to read the culture of the school system and the inability to develop relationships with stakeholders, the non-traditional superintendent could not lead because there was no one to follow. Overall, although the non-traditional superintendent might have been well trained and skilled in the military, he lacked the talent to figure out ways to improve classroom and student performance. In the end, his inability to work with others led to ineffective leadership with near constant conflict, which resulted in his resignation.

In a more recent study, Thompson, Thompson, and Knight (2013) used mixed methods to examine two Southern California public schools, one led by a traditional superintendent and the other by a non-traditional superintendent. Through their surveys and open-ended questions of educators in the school district, they found a lack of trust, respect, support, or acceptance of non-traditional superintendents compared to a traditional superintendent. One of the major themes from the data was that the participants believed the non-traditional superintendent was not qualified to lead because of inexperience in teaching or other educational functions. The participants believed that educational experience allows superintendents to relate better to teachers and students while they are also able to deal with complex issues unique to the field of education. Overall, the researchers concluded that experienced educators may not accept the leadership of a non-traditional superintendent, which could affect their ability to lead. This inability to lead would also be relevant if the non-traditional superintendent attempted to enact change within the school district.

Conclusion

Overall, superintendents traditionally follow a typical career pathway in which they gain the skills and experience necessary to be effective as superintendents. Through this trajectory, superintendents are exposed to different levels of the school organization and from different positions, they develop multiple skills. Superintendents of charter schools must have even more skills, as their duties relevant to the role extend beyond those needed by a public-school superintendent. Further, not all public school or charter school superintendents come from a background within education. Non-traditional superintendents are becoming more frequent as school boards turn to those outside of education to solve persistent problems affecting their districts. In the next section, I explore higher education preparation programs and the variety of experiences leadership programs offer aspiring and current superintendents.

Higher Education

While the traditional requirements for superintendent include professional or career experience in the education field, an additional requirement is academic preparation for the position through a higher education preparation program. Understanding the historical perspective allows an awareness of how current preparation programs are structured and their evolution over time. Aspiring superintendents and acting superintendents have a variety of available degree programs and pathways to enhance and strengthen their leadership preparation. Curricula through such programs have a wide variety of content areas and structures geared towards preparing aspiring and current superintendents to pass licensure requirements. Lastly, although traditional superintendents progress through

preparation programs, non-traditional superintendents do not experience preparation programs, and instead, are prepared through their own pathways of experiences.

Historical Perspective

In the 1900s, institutions in the United States offered coursework in educational administration, but no institution offered a systematic study in the area (Levine, 2005). The number of institutions grew to 125 colleges and universities offering such programs by the end of World War II (Murphy, 1998). While these programs grew, two distinct preparation programs emerged. One was a practitioner-based program designed for experienced school administrators who would attend school part-time and study a curriculum focusing on practical subjects needed to complete their job duties. The other model was a program much like the ones law and medical schools use. It was a rigorous academic program for young students who would attend full time for two years to learn all realms of education. This model was deemed the “Harvard Model” due to advocacy from Henry Holmes, the dean of Harvard’s education school (Powell, 1976).

Over the years, no clear foundation has emerged regarding the goals and purposes of educational administration program. Levine (2005) stated, “No consensus exists on whom programs should enroll, what they should prepare their students to do, what they should teach, whom they should hire to teach, what degrees they should offer, and how educational administration relates to teaching and research” (p. 16). Despite differences related to the structure of education administration programs, several have emerged and thrived as they met the needs of education schools, school administrators, and states. Once states defined licensure requirements, university programs designed appropriate curriculum, taught the classes, and assured basic quality control among new superintendents and school principals.

These programs created a process of preparing and appointing school leaders in a more meritocratic system that imparted knowledge and the skills to further school leaders and satisfy quality standards set forth by the state (Kowalski, 2006).

While this system served the needs of schools of education, schools districts, aspiring school leaders, and states, the system shifted under the pressure of social change. The first change occurred during the Civil Rights Movement, which caused reluctant school administrators to open up their closed “good old boys network” to women and people of color. Likewise, superintendent job openings were required to be posted/advertised, searches to be open, and affirmative action was supposed to guide hiring (Levine, 2005). The second change followed after the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform*, which highlighted the importance of school success and demanded accountability for results from leaders. More importantly, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration report, *Leaders for America’s Schools*, shaped the accountability agenda. This group consisted of educational administration professors, education school deans, urban school superintendents, education association heads, university presidents, then Governor Bill Clinton, and others, who concluded fewer than 200 of the 505 graduate programs in educational administration were capable of meeting necessary standards of excellence and the rest should be closed (University Council for Educational Administration, 1987).

In the years that followed this report, prominent educators have highlighted the downward spiral administration preparation programs have taken. Citing poor training programs with no entrance requirements other than the ability to pay tuition, low-prestige institutions have created diploma mills, and the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree has lost

its salience (Levine, 2005). Such criticism has resulted in critics wanting to dissolve programs and instead offer alternatives developed by schools, districts, and states. This was the position presented in the Broad Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's *Better Leaders for America's Schools: A Manifesto* (2003). This publication focused the blame for the vacuum of leaders on useless education school courses and state licensing requirements that were misguided. Even so, the question throughout the history of preparation programs still remains: How should school leaders be educated, and who should provide that education?

Changes in Leadership Programs

Leadership programs have had to evolve and adjust in response to major shifts in the educational landscape during the twenty-first century. The first change for leadership programs happened in response to an overwhelming majority of states—45 states and the District of Columbia—that adopted the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) policy standards (McCarthy, Shelton, & Murphy, 2014). Many universities were asked to scaffold their initial licensure programs on the ISLLC standards, which are closely aligned with the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards used for national accreditation of leadership preparation programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These evolving quality standards describe what all school leaders, regardless of grade level or context, can do to strengthen organizations, support teachers, lead instruction, and advance student learning. The ISLLC standards were continually updated and in 2015, evolved into the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL).

These PSEL aimed to ensure district and school leaders are able to improve student achievement and meet the new, higher expectations for school leaders. This change was in response from the recommendations of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), an alliance for advancing school leadership. The NPBEA consists of nine major educational leadership organizations: American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), National School Boards Association (NSBA), and University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). This consortium was created with the aim to be a powerful force in raising the quality of leadership education programs. Murphy (2017) asserted that one way was through recommendations for leadership programs to have at least five full time faculty members, faculty to staff ratios comparable to other professional graduate schools, and a clear differentiation between the Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) and the Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy).

Although the 1987 report from the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration recommended closing over three-fifths of the nation's graduate programs in school leadership, today the current number of programs has grown to over 600 (Levine, 2005). Young and Brewer (2008) reported that over 500 programs offer master's and doctoral degrees, while one-third offer educational specialist degrees. These programs educate primarily three types of students: current and future administrators, teachers earning a degree or credit hours to increase their salary, and future researchers in school leadership.

Due to the wide array of prospective students, educational leadership programs offer a wide variety of degrees and accompanying experiences to best prepare students for their future goals.

Degree Pathways

With so many colleges and university programs available for aspiring leaders to pursue their advanced degrees, educational leaders must choose the right program from a plethora of pathways. With universities presenting over 600 programs (Levine, 2005) and 580 degree granting programs (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011), aspiring superintendents are presented with a wide variety of options. Kowalski (2006) stated that with so many programs available, students must exercise great care when choosing their graduate program in order to select a program to effectively prepare them for the superintendency. Callan and Levinson (2011) expanded on this idea by advising students to carefully determine which workshops, academies, and college or university courses will provide the appropriate knowledge to begin work as a superintendent. Regardless of the selection or choice of program, almost all (99.7%) of superintendents have some type of graduate degree (Glass et al., 2000).

Graduate or master's degree. While a master's degree is the credential for the job of principal, which has been highlighted as a common path to the superintendency, it is also commonly obtained by aspiring superintendents. Levine's (2005) extensive research on educational institutions providing educational leadership programs presents 264 schools and departments of education for aspiring leaders to begin to pursue their master's degree. From these educational master's programs, around 57% of programs award master's degrees in school administration each year. This number coincided with Glass and Franceschini's

(2006) study of school superintendents, which reported 79% of superintendents have a master's degree in educational administration. Although not reported specifically for school administrators, Levine (2005) also found that each master's degree granting school of education produced slightly more than 200 teachers and administrators each year. Aspiring superintendents must gain the knowledge and develop the skills for the job which often results in pursuing an educational specialist degree and/or a doctoral degree.

Post-graduate degree. Little to no research has exclusively looked at educational specialist degrees obtained by aspiring or current superintendents. Much of the post-graduate degree publications and research focuses on the attainment of Educational Doctoral degrees (Ed.D.) or a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). Callan and Levinson (2011) acknowledged that while some boards require superintendents to possess a doctoral degree, it is not always a requirement. Reasons vary, but it has been noted that boards believe superintendents who possess doctoral degrees show they are the most qualified individual in their fields. Superintendents are judged and hired on the depth of their knowledge and records of success, not their degrees obtained. Although some hiring boards of education do not require a doctorate, some states (Indiana and Iowa) require advanced degrees to obtain appropriate licensure, while others (Arkansas and Minnesota) require a master's plus 32 hours to obtain licensure (Kowalski, 2006). Although possessing a doctoral degree does not guarantee better performance, 71% of the nation's leading superintendents hold the degree (Glass, 2003). Likewise, from 1971 to 2010, the number of superintendents earning a doctoral degree increased from 29% to 45%, with the 45% not changing from 2000 to 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011). Overall, pursuing post-graduate degrees demonstrates aspiring leaders' or current leaders' commitment to continuous learning and academic rigor.

Doctorate-granting education schools offer aspiring and current superintendents the greatest number of programs in the broadest range of fields. Levine (2005) found 228 doctorate-granting education schools that offered an Ed.D. or both the Ed.D. and Ph.D. On average, these schools awarded around 24 doctoral degrees a year. The Ed.D. is reserved by some institutions for practitioners, but other programs award it to academics and researchers as well. The Ph.D. tends to be thought of as a degree for scholars, but some institutions award it to practitioners. The rules for awarding an Ed.D. or Ph.D. sometimes differ even among departments within the same university, and efforts to distinguish the Ph.D. as a research degree from the Ed.D. designed to prepare practitioners have had only modest success (Perry, 2013).

Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) reported on a nationwide electronic survey of superintendents who responded to questions about their degrees held and their primary discipline. Of the 834 superintendents with doctoral degrees, 29% of those superintendents reported their Ed.D. was in educational administration/leadership, and three percent noted their Ed.D. was in another area of education. Likewise, superintendents reporting a Ph.D. in educational administration/leadership was 10%, in another area of education was two percent, and a Ph.D. in another discipline was 0.5%. It was noted that around 12 participants or 0.7% earned a doctoral degree other than a Ph.D. or Ed.D., such as an M.D. (Doctor of Medicine) or J.D. (Doctor of Jurisprudence). District enrollment was a clear indicator of the percentage of doctoral degrees held by superintendents. Domenech (2009) found that while only 28% of superintendents with district enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students held a doctorate, 97% of superintendents held doctoral degrees in districts larger than 25,000 students.

Curriculum

While preparation programs at higher education institutions aim to prepare school leaders and superintendents, there is not a formal nationwide curriculum for institutions to follow. Many preparatory curriculums are structured in order to ensure aspiring leaders are prepared to meet licensure requirements rather than on mastery of knowledge and skills (Shelton, 2010). Connelly and Clandinin expressed, “when we say the word ‘curriculum,’ then we need to have a picture in mind in which all of these parts are in interaction” (1989, p. 7). Everything aspiring superintendents do in their higher education preparation programs is considered curriculum. Much of the curriculum used in schools today highlights a White, homogenous, Euro-Christian view, which does not reflect the make-up of America today (Peters, 2015). While preparatory programs understand the goal of students passing licensure exams, researchers and experts have attempted to identify areas preparatory programs need to cover in order to prepare superintendents for the job.

Through Levine’s (2005) extensive report, *Educating School Leaders*, he identified a nine-point template for judging higher education programs. For the purpose of this discussion, only those related to curriculum are discussed. The first point encompasses the entire program and the vision and purpose of the program. The purpose should be explicitly stated, focusing on the education of practicing school leaders, and include the goals that reflect the needs of schools today in the twenty-first century. Another point is curricular coherence and how the implemented curriculum mirrors the program purpose and goals. The curriculum should be rigorous, coherent, and organized so that it teaches the skills and the knowledge needed by superintendents. The next point includes curricular balance and how the curriculum should integrate both theory and practice. Administrators should be presented

with a balance of classroom/academic work and work in schools with successful practitioners.

Additionally, Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) identified 10 content-specific areas to be covered for superintendents: coursework in strategic planning, students' due process rights, demographic changes and their effects, time management, site-based management, public relations, recruitment of staff, empowering the staff, relations with the school board, and the evaluation of other administrators. Robicheau and Haar (2008) suggested that all content areas should be framed within the context of extensive involvement in the program by the student, using standards to guide the preparation program, internships that are both relevant and extend over time, and developing partnerships with the universities that supply the candidates. While some researchers differ on one content area or another, Björk, Kowalski, and Young (2005) noted that all higher education curriculums should be revised in order to meet the new kind of leadership and challenges present in today's schools. The researchers stated that the curriculum should be grounded in "the expectation that school and district leaders have a working knowledge of learning, teaching, curriculum construction, and alignment" (p. 45).

In Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson's (2011) electronic survey of nearly 1,800 superintendents throughout the nation, participants were asked to rate their overall evaluation of their academic preparation for the superintendency. In 1982, almost 27% of participants rated their preparation experience as excellent, which decreased to almost 25% in 2010. Those rating their program preparation as good rose from 47% in 1982 to 54% in 2010. In 2010, around 18% rated their preparation as fair, and almost four percent as poor. Using 2010 results and comparing superintendents' ratings in regard to school

district size, the smaller the school district enrollment, the more effective participants evaluated their program.

Looking specifically at evaluating the content of their preparation curriculum, Kowalski, Peterson, and Fusarelli (2009) surveyed 117 novice superintendents. From their electronic surveys, using a Likert-type scale, new superintendents were asked to rate aspects of their academic preparation for the superintendency. The participants rated the most beneficial courses in the practical dimensions of school administration (e.g., management courses such as finance and law), practice-based experiences (e.g., clinical experiences, internships, and school board relations), and the quality of instruction and relevancy of instruction (e.g., a professor's ability to teach and the infusion of contemporary problems into courses). Conversely, participants rated their least beneficial aspects as over-reliance on theory, a lack of professors with experience as superintendents, and the lack of practical applications in school finance. Survey participants also listed pieces of their preparation that were omitted or missing as school finance, school law, school board relations, politics of education, and collective bargaining.

Murphy (2007) stated that over the past half century, not much has changed in preparation programs to address the deficits. Murphy noted that it is the application of skills leaders need and the importance of practice, rather than the theories. This is echoed by Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, and Walker (2007), who stated that few programs help develop competencies for leaders. They stated that leaders need on-the-job training and not classroom instruction with textbooks. In order to enact this change, superintendent preparation programs must respond by changing programming to produce leaders who have the knowledge, skills, and leadership dispositions to meet the demands of the current day

superintendency (Hollingworth et al., 2012). To address the change and promote the success of the next superintendents, higher education programs have worked to incorporate curriculum components to prepare educational leaders including discussions, critical reflection, case studies, socially just leadership, and internships.

Discussions. Preparation programs should provide opportunities for aspiring superintendents to discuss, reflect on, and be influenced by the experiences of others along the same pathway. Used the correct way and productively, Cross (2002) stated that discussions are uniquely designed to “encourage students to strengthen their intellectual muscle and practice their strategic learning moves. It can be a very powerful and useful teaching and learning strategy” (p. 9). Currently, this could be why discussions are such a large part of leadership education (Jenkins, 2013). Brookfield (2012) gave advice on how to make discussions critical for both the instructor and students. The advice Brookfield (2012) recommended is designed to offer more critical dialogue for both instructors and students and includes such activities as: (1) focusing on members’ identified assumptions and the degree to which the assumptions are accurate and valid; and (2) attempting to examine the contextual validity of the assumptions, uncovering evidence for generalizations and keeping a record of the links. There is also a criterion for evaluating discussions; giving attention to structures in place to ensure inclusivity, time limits, mutual respect, foci on similarities and differences that emerge, a shared power differential, and active listening as the primary goal.

Critical reflection. Jones, Simonetti, and Vielhaber-Hermon (2000) stated that critical reflection is a behavior that integrates personal experiences with new learning and understanding. This engages and mobilizes learning to act on new ideas and to challenge conventional thinking in regard to theory and practice. Leadership curriculum should create

opportunities to practice critical reflection so that professors and instructors can facilitate connections between critical thinking and leadership development (Stedman, 2009).

Reflection is often difficult, as it creates discomfort and dissonance; students are encouraged to think at deeper levels, allowing real learning to occur. Without reflection, superintendents and leaders may rely on their past successes and not consider other viewpoints, which may result in drastic consequences. Conger (1992) pointed out that leaders often fail to reflect because reflection might challenge their favorable perceptions of themselves. Critical reflection in preparation programs allows aspiring superintendents to consider underlying dynamics of power and an opportunity to question basic assumptions and practices.

Case studies. Case studies are problem-centered activities and role-playing simulations that are preferential for adult learners, as opposed to memorization and lectures (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2007). Higher education preparation courses that provide learners with case studies connect to the benefits of active learning. These benefits include helping aspiring superintendents to develop problem solving skills, critical reasoning, and analytical skills, which will overall prepare them to make the best decisions possible for their districts (Popil, 2010). Case studies provide an opportunity for learners to apply and practice their critical thinking skills through various leadership scenarios (Burbach, Matkin, & Fritz, 2004; Powley & Taylor, 2014). In case studies embedded within a higher education curriculum, learners practice decision making skills and determine whether their decisions are correct or wrong. These opportunities also present aspiring superintendents a chance to make decisions in scenarios in which no action has taken place but should be taken.

Case studies that tackle problems that have not yet been taken up provide aspiring leaders opportunities to play out the steps they would take to address and correct the

problem. These call-to-action case studies are outlets for students to address problems they are passionate about, that directly face them in their current situation, or could possibly connect to an experience they have had growing up. Dewey (1929) stated:

Much of the time and attention now given to the preparation and presentation of lessons might be more wisely and profitably expensed in training the child's power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite vivid, and growing images of the various subjects which he comes in contact with his experiences. (p. 38)

Although this quote was directed at children, aspiring leaders have the opportunity to create their own projects and shape learning activities, which moves the instructor to the role of facilitation instead of controlling lectures. This learning changes the instructor's role and the role of other leaders to coach and collaborate on learning.

Socially just leadership. Although activities listed previously pertain to structures within a curriculum, one piece that should be incorporated throughout the teaching is the development of a socially just school leader, which often is lacking in preparation programs (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Pounder, 2012). Styron and LeMire (2009) affirmed that the structure, content, and implementation of educational leadership programs should prepare superintendents to promote social justice, equity, and inclusion throughout the district and community. With the changing demographic landscape of the twenty-first century and the marginalization of certain groups, current research in educational leadership promotes leaders who advocate for cultural diversity and resist any form of exclusion or discrimination (O'Malley & Capper, 2015; Oplatka, 2009). Higher education preparation programs carry the responsibility of preparing school leaders for the new norm of cultural diversity within schools. School leaders should understand and value students from diverse cultural backgrounds and believe in their ability to achieve academic success (Huber,

Hynds, Skelton, Papacek, Gonzalez, & Lacy, 2012). Educational leadership programs must incorporate strategies to promote issues of cultural diversity and find ways to develop and expand their aspiring leaders' cultural competency. This includes an appreciation for cultural diversity, an ability to connect with people from other cultures, and a commitment to fight oppression (Barakat, 2014).

Internships. Another vital and key piece of the preparation of school superintendents is the administrative internship or practicum experience (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2010; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). During these experiences, aspiring school leaders assume roles at school sites or central offices to gain hands-on leadership experience. Higher education preparation programs need to provide administrative interns with authentic learning opportunities. Many times, out of convenience, internships are completed where the aspiring leaders is employed (Young, Crow, Murphy, & Ogawa, 2013). Internship opportunities need to include mutually beneficial pairings between the intern and supervisor, chances to collaborate with district personnel, and opportunities to stimulate knowledge, skills, and abilities for success in a leadership role (Fry et al., 2007; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). Internship experiences offer opportunities for students to turn their theory into actual practice, and these practical experiences should focus on the relevant school leadership experiences (Callan & Levinson, 2011).

Despite the widespread use of internships, research has been neglected in this area and offer limited assessments regarding their impact (Young et al., 2013). Much of the criticism of internships includes low quality faculty, weak connections between curriculum and practice, low admission standards, and menial tasks performed by interns as they

passively log their hours until completion (Dishman & Redish, 2011; Fry et al., 2007; Gray, Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2007; Levine, 2005). Glass (2006) continued the criticism by highlighting major issues of internships that included too little hands-on experiences and no link between content and practice. Currently, no national guidelines or direction exist for higher education preparation requirements, implementation, or evaluation of intern experiences.

Thessin and Clayton (2013) conducted a qualitative study to identify how current school leaders who were alumni of higher education preparation program describe those skills and experiences they acquired during their program. The researchers noted that one of the three major findings were participants' experiences during their administrative internship directly affected their self-efficacy and level of readiness to lead. This study reinforced the view of field experience or the internship as the primary vehicle for learning. Likewise, in a 2014 study on the professional practice pertaining to the preparation of female administrators as future superintendents, Kelsey, Allen, Coke, and Ballard found two major responses from over 100 educational leaders. The researchers noted that the participants frequently identified mentoring as a major preparation for the position as well as on-the-job shadowing of other female leaders. Participants working alongside other female leaders prepared them for the position. While the aforementioned studies note the significance of the effects of internships or practicum experiences for aspiring superintendents, Lehman (2013) drew attention to the still remaining gap in literature between internship elements and how interns experience and make meaning of them during the internship. Mentoring, explored in the next section, is key to leadership development during preparation and for success in the superintendent role.

Licensure

As noted earlier, higher education preparation programs have been designed with the end in mind to ensure their students pass state licensure tests or exams in order to become certified. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) contended that state certification or licensure for school leaders often occurs through advanced degree programs at higher education institutions. Kowalski (2006) noted that by the 1980s, 82% of states had laws or policies in place that required school administrators to complete a program of study and obtain a state-issued license to be able to be employed as a district superintendent. States initially required school leaders to focus on the number of courses taken through their programs and their classroom experiences, rather than on their mastery of skill and knowledge.

Recently states have moved toward a tiered performance-based licensure system in order to have aspiring leaders demonstrate their knowledge and skills. These tiered performance licensure systems work to ensure candidates can exhibit the capability to be effective leaders (Shelton, 2010). Other states relied heavily on traditional written licensure exams to determine if candidates were ready to assume the job (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Licensure is now at the forefront of education as more and more critics, typically with private foundations and special interest groups, advocate for deregulating licensing. This action makes professional licensing irrelevant and claims that preparation programs and licensing standards are meaningless hoops, hurdles, and regulatory hassles (Kowalski, 2006). “Though rhetoric frequently outstrips reality, criticisms appear to be fueling a drift toward deregulating state requirements for serving in this position” (Peterson et al., 2008, p. 12).

Although aspiring educational leaders complete graduate programs and obtain certification, it does not guarantee they will assume a leadership position. Pijanowski, Hewitt, and Brady (2009) found that the majority of non-administrators who obtained licensure, stopped applying for leadership positions as their interest in the position diminished year after year after completing their certification. This was built on the research conducted by Lankford, O'Connell, and Wyckoff (2003) who found that around 73% of those under the age of 50 and certified as school administrators have stopped applying for administrative jobs. The researchers also found that three primary reasons why credentialed administrators stop pursuing or dropped out of the candidate pool was due to undesirable working conditions, stress, and inadequate compensation. Also, not all administrators were well suited for the position.

Peterson, Fusarelli, and Kowalski (2008) conducted a survey of novice superintendents' perceptions of their preparedness through their programs in California, Missouri, North Carolina, and Ohio. Of the 118 superintendents in the study, over 17% of students did not participate in a state-approved preparation program leading to being licensed prior to entering the superintendency. The researchers found that patterns for taking the licensure programs varied across the four states. In Missouri, 97% completed their licensure program at the same institution as their highest degree. Likewise, in North Carolina, the figure was 80%, in Ohio it was 70%, and in California was 42%. Overall, the percentages indicated a wide variance of novice superintendents obtaining their superintendent's license and then perusing a higher degree while licensed.

Non-Traditional Superintendents' Education

Not all superintendents follow the traditional pathway to the superintendency, as highlighted previously in this chapter. As a result, non-traditional superintendents do not typically complete and participate in higher education preparation programs. Although these non-traditional superintendents do not participate in preparation programs, Quinn (2007) claimed that non-traditional superintendents would argue they are prepared. This is due to their skills that are transferable from their previous private or public sector job and their new roles within the school district. Non-traditional superintendents recognize their lack of educational leadership and as a result, work to add knowledgeable members to their team. With more and more non-traditional superintendents assuming the role, Adams (2011) believed that blended preparation programs would appear that would incorporate both educational and business coursework.

Non-traditional superintendents come from various backgrounds and as such, have experienced a wide variety of preparation programs through higher education universities dependent on their career focus. Duckworth (2008) conducted an exploratory case study of seven non-traditional superintendents who belonged to the Council of the Great City Schools. Through interviews, the researcher sought to examine the different characteristics each non-traditional superintendent possessed. Each non-traditional superintendent completed an undergraduate degree program with courses that included pre-law, biology, liberal arts, history, and public policy. Some participants continued their education and obtained a master's degree, but that was not always the case. The non-traditional superintendents in the study went onto careers consisting of the military, communications, professional sports, educational policy, and law. Overall, the participants in the study used

their higher education experience to eventually move into leadership roles within their career field, eventually leading to the position of superintendent.

Conclusion

This section of the literature review presented a historical view of the preparation programs at higher education institutions as well as the current realities of such programs. The different degree options and pathways for superintendents was explored as well as what superintendents experienced in these programs. While curriculums for each program vary, different areas were reviewed and recommendations were made for preparation programs. These recommendations included structuring discussion, allowing for critical reflections, using case studies, creating agents of change through social justice, and internship experiences. Superintendent licensure was explored, as was non-traditional superintendents' preparation pathway on their journey to the position. In the next section, I explore the use of mentors throughout the field of education and different aspects that lead to a successful mentor experience.

Mentors

Defining exactly what a mentor or mentoring is can be difficult. Kram, a leading researcher in the area of mentoring and the author of the most frequently cited article on mentoring, has been widely regarded as conceptualizing what a mentor does best. While she does not explicitly state a definition of mentoring, she did note that mentoring:

involves an intense relationship whereby a senior or more experienced person (the mentor) provides two functions for a junior person (the protégé): advising or modeling about career development behaviors and providing personal support, especially psycho-social support. (Kram, 1985, p. 126)

Other authors and researchers continued to build from this conceptualization with their own definitions. Focusing on time invested, Eby and Allen (2002) stated, “Mentoring is an intense long-term relationship between a senior, more experienced individual (the mentor) and a more junior, less experienced individual (the protégé)” (p. 456). Singh, Bains, and Vinnicombe (2002) focused on the development side with their definition as “individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward support and mobility to their protégés’ careers” (p. 391). The last definition offered by Bozemen and Feeney (2008), I believe is the most relevant and insightful definition for this study. They state that mentoring is:

A process for the reciprocal, informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psycho-social support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face to face and over a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor), to a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé). (p. 469)

With the definition of mentoring narrowed down, it is important to look at the historical progression of mentoring throughout organizations and within the field of education. The next section presents a brief overview of the first case of mentoring up to the present.

History of Mentoring

The first mention of mentoring was in the Bible when Elijah chose to mentor Elisha. Another commonly cited source on the creation of mentoring is from Homer’s *Odyssey* when Athene assumes the shape of Mentor to whisper advice to Odysseus’ son, Telemachus. Throughout history and periods of time, mentors have played an important part in guiding and growing their protegés. One case was the famous philosopher Socrates mentoring Plato, who in turn mentored Aristotle, who then in tern mentored Alexander the Great. Another

case of mentoring is when Johann Sebastian Bach mentored his son, Johann Christian Bach, who mentored his son Mozart. Fast forward to the twentieth century, and mentoring is still present. Mother Teresa, who committed her life to helping people and running orphanages, hospices, and other charities, was mentored by Father Michael van der Peet. Dr. Martin Luther King, social activist who led the United States Civil Rights movement, was mentored by Benjamin May. Throughout history, mentors have played an important part in developing and nurturing people to be the best versions of themselves. This style of mentoring is termed natural mentoring, which occurs through friendship, collegiality, teaching, coaching, and counseling (Dennis, 1993).

In contrast to natural mentoring, planned mentoring occurs through the structured programs in which mentor and mentee are paired together through a formal process (Dennis, 1993). Professional organizations pairing mentors and mentees have developed throughout the United States. The Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, founded in 1904, provides volunteer and professional services to help at-risk youth have a relationship with a caring adult. One Hundred Black Men, Inc., established in 1963, was developed to improve the quality of life for Blacks and other people of color. The group was developed for men in business, industry, public affairs, the government, and other professions in New York. The National One-to-One Mentoring Partnership was created in 1989 between business and volunteers as a mentoring initiative. Raising Ambitions Instill Self-Esteem (RAISE), founded in 1989, is a Baltimore-based adult mentoring program for children. All these organizations point to the growing number of mentoring programs that have been developed and implemented throughout the United States in the past 100 years. The growing popularity of mentor programs in the recent years can be attributed to the compelling testimonials from

mentor/mentees and adults/youths (Dennis, 1993). These participants have all benefitted from the positive influences of another person who helped them endure social, academic, career, or personal crises.

A body of literature focused on mentoring within the United States began after Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee's (1978) work on the phenomenon of mentoring was introduced. Following that, Roche's 1979 reported titled, "Much Ado About Mentors," claimed to have discovered mentoring as an informal element to help business managers' careers. Shortly afterwards, in a review of literature on the effects of mentoring, Merriam (1983) noted:

The literature on mentoring is biased in favor of the phenomenon...it warrants neither the enthusiasm about its value, nor the exhortations to go out and find one... [M]entoring is not clearly conceptualized... The majority of published articles consist of testimonials or opinions...[T]here are no studies...of the negative effects of mentoring, or [its] absence. (p. 169–170)

While this phenomenon has developed and progressed over the past twenty years, the conceptualization of mentoring has not matched its progress. Colley (2000) noted that mentoring increased in popularity and moved into the mainstream in the 1990s. Since then, mentoring became a key feature in the initial training in the fields of teaching, nursing, career guidance, and in the development of business management. Edwards (1995) pointed to formal mentoring programs introduced to address Affirmative Action legislation. Revisiting the conceptualization of mentoring, Piper and Piper (2000) commented that while there is an increase in the volume of literature, the concept of mentoring is less developed. The authors noted, "The concept of mentoring remains elusive and in relevant literature its discussion and evaluation has tended to be programmatic and anecdotal...with relatively slight coverage in formal publications and journals" (p. 84).

An analysis of over 300 research-based papers on mentoring mainly from the United States and other English-speaking countries was conducted by Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004). The researchers attempted to make more valid inferences about the nature and the outcomes of mentoring. The analysis focused on three professional fields that utilized mentoring: education, business, and medical. The first significant findings that covered all three fields was that mentoring has enormous potential to bring about learning, personal growth, and development for professionals. Another finding was that mentoring provides a range of positive outcomes for mentors, mentees, and the organization, but could also cause harm. Findings point to the possibility that poor mentoring could be worse than having no mentor at all.

Weinberg and Lankau (2011) conducted a quantitative study to add to the body of mentor-centric studies. The researchers wanted to compare the effectiveness of formal mentoring with common informal mentoring. The 175 mentors and 192 mentees who participated in the nine-month study completed online surveys at the beginning of the mentorship, throughout the experience, and at the culmination of the mentorship. The findings indicated an indirect support for the implementation and use of formal mentor programs for organizations. A significant finding suggested that if sufficient time is invested in formal mentoring, organizations can expect to find equally effective vocational, psychosocial, and role modeling support provided by its mentors, regardless of the mentor's commitment to the organization, their gender, or the gender of the mentoring pair. Furthermore, the researchers found that in a formal mentoring program in which mentee vocational support is the explicit goal, psychosocial support and role modeling played a more substantial role than vocational support in the experiences for both mentor and mentee.

While Weinberg and Lankau's (2011) study and Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent's (2004) review of mentor studies highlight the development and use of mentors in the last thirty years throughout various organizations, the use of mentoring has also been significant in the field of education.

Mentoring in Education

In 1994, one of the original National Education Goals was to expand and enrich professional development for educators in order to transform schools and for educators to lead reform efforts. At this time, mentoring programs were perceived as an effective staff development approach. Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) added that while mentoring was viewed as effective professional development, mentoring programs were also significant in helping women and members of marginalized groups to be successful in their professions. Since this time, mentoring has been utilized throughout different levels of education at the teacher level, the principal level, and at the highest level for superintendents.

Teachers. Formalized mentors can play a valuable role for beginning teachers as well as veteran teachers. Implementing teacher mentor programs has allowed an increase in teacher confidence, knowledge, instruction, raising student achievement, and increased retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Kapadia & Coca, 2007; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Stanulis, Little, & Wibbens, 2012). Mentoring has been shown to promote growth in not only the protégé (mentee) but also the mentor (Ragins, 2011). New teacher mentoring has been utilized by school districts throughout the country to provide staff development and growth. In a policy report from the New Teacher Center, reviewing the policies on new induction and mentoring in all fifty states within the United States, Goldrick (2016) found

that 14 states require some form of induction or mentoring for new teachers for their first year of teaching, and 15 states require mentoring for the first two years of teaching. For the 29 states requiring mentoring, Goldrick (2016) reported that participation in or completion of an induction or mentoring program must also be completed for new teachers to advance from an initial to a professional teaching license. Eleven of those states require the program to continue for two years.

Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent's (2004) analysis of over 70 studies on educational mentoring presented several problems associated with mentoring. They found that almost of half (48.4%) of the studies reported problems for the mentors, and slightly less than half (42.8%) reported problems for mentees. The two most cited problems presented were lack of time and professional expertise/personality mismatch. This lack of time was also present in Kardos and Johnson's (2008) study that discovered 78% of new teachers had mentors but fewer than 60% had regular (three or more) conversations throughout the year, and only 41% actually observed their mentors' teaching. Mentors and mentees simply found the barrier of time challenging to overcome with the demands of their regular jobs and life. The percentage for both conversations and observations was even lower for new teachers who taught in low-income schools and those who taught math, science, or technology. Ehrich et al.'s review also identified the most common positive outcomes from new teacher mentors. Seventeen percent of the participants reported improved education (grades and academic achievement) and behavior of students.

Administrators. While new teachers come into the profession ready to be taught and coached, the situation is different for administrators who will need to lead school organizations. These school leaders are not born, nor do they acquire all of the skills needed

for the job from graduate programs. It is widely believed that a good principal is the key to a successful school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). Mentoring provides principals with a non-threatening, meaningful way to develop leadership skills needed for them to effectively operate schools. These skills and areas include managing people, managing data, processes to promote school improvement, and ways to develop into instructional leaders. Mentors also allow principals to understand the performance expectations required of them and the evaluation systems in which they will participate (Gray et al., 2007). One goal of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), which recognizes the importance of mentoring, is to establish a sustainable mentoring program that will be designed and governed by early career principal needs. Currently, only 20 states require some form of professional support for all new school principals in their first year, and only six states require new principals to continue into a second year. Fourteen states require principals to complete a mentor program to meet school administrator licensure requirements (Goldrick, 2016).

In a phenomenological study aimed at exploring the perceptions of new principals and their mentors, Gimbel and Kefor (2018) took personal interests in the new principals due to the lack of a mentor in their initial administrative careers. Data were collected from eight pairs of mentors and mentees in Vermont through voluntary semi-structured interviews and an additional electronic questionnaire with open ended questions. Gimbel and Kefor recommended that mentors and mentees should be matched within the same district as much as possible for ease of access and time. However, districts might lack well qualified and available mentors to serve the mentees. Another recommendation was to increase the amount of meeting time for mentors and mentees. While mentors and mentee met for 45

hours during the school year, many struggled to find sufficient time to meet. The last recommendation was to formalize and standardize the trainings of mentors because superintendents may choose principal mentors who they feel are competent. These recommendations were all made based on research to address the problem of principal attrition rate and to lower the turnover rate of new principals.

One model for an administrator mentor program presented by Griffin, Taylor, Varner, and White (2012) highlighted the timeline and extensiveness an administrative mentor program can have. Through a partnership established by a school district and a local university, a program was created that offered authentic training to grow future leaders. These aspiring leaders completed many Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards-based activities and completed a variety of reviews to gauge their understanding of theory and practice. They also were matched with a principal mentor who regularly provided detailed feedback and participated alongside the aspiring leader in their activities.

This mentorship was unique in that it was continued into the first year of principalship for the aspiring leaders. This style of program showcased a continuum of mentorship through the aspiring leader stage of becoming an administrator. Participants in the program were assessed using eight key performance-based assessments aligned with the 2008 ISLLC standards and the 2002 Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leaders. Candidates of the mentor program benefited from the programs' comprehensive and intensive approaches to leadership development. An emphasis was placed on understanding contextual factors and building relationships throughout the learning community with a focus on school

improvement (data-based decision making). These standards and the importance of developing leaders at the building level also transcend to the highest position in the school organizations, the superintendent.

Superintendents. The position of superintendent appeared approximately a decade after public schools were created by state boards and the realization that local lay boards needed help. Hence, superintendents became the most powerful individuals in the school districts and visible members of schools in local communities (Sharp & Walter, 2009). Later in the twentieth century, reports emerged, such as the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* by Terrell Bell, drawing attention to the “crisis” in schools. As a result, states began to reassert their roles in education by setting standards and assessment systems. With these new developments and an increase in accountability for schools, a new focus was placed on the preparation of effective superintendents. Like other positions within educational organizations, formal/informal mentors can be utilized by both building leaders and aspiring superintendents and those who already hold the position of superintendent.

This mentoring provides information for this unique position, aiding these individuals to learn insider information. Björk and Kowalski (2005) also contend that mentoring “is especially important for women, and women and men of color, who have been traditionally marginalized in the superintendent’s role” (p. 245). Statistics from individual states that require new superintendents to participate in a formal mentor program are limited; however, some states such as Alabama and New Jersey require superintendents to participate in at least one year of mentoring for support (Goldrick, 2016). Kowalski (2006) reported that approximately 77% of male superintendents and 88% of female

superintendents had mentors. It is often left up to the superintendent to seek out and obtain a mentor once they reach the position of superintendent (Moore, 2012).

In a qualitative study of five male and four female superintendents, Crippen and Wallin (2008) conducted interviews focusing on superintendents' personal leadership and mentorship experiences. For the purpose of the study, mentors were not specifically defined or designated, but it was left up to the participants to be able to list all who had personally and professionally impacted their leadership development. Of the 30 mentors mentioned by the participants, seven were family members, while the remaining 21 were situated in the education field. These mentors were mostly at the administrative or executive/senior levels with equally mixed genders. The relatively small study added to the research on the value of mentoring and also provided evidence of the significance of mentors and their sphere of influence over leaders. Likewise, these mentor behaviors were reflected upon and incorporated into the superintendents' leadership behaviors. Mentees reported that they too began to exhibit behaviors that included foresight, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of others, and building community.

Freeley and Seinfeld (2010) used interviews to examine the career paths of four retired superintendents and how mentoring impacted their experiences. Their results showed that the retired superintendents were indeed impacted by mentors. The superintendents all demonstrated a desire to pass the importance of mentoring forward to others within their organizations. They expressed how mentors served as role models and played a crucial role in their preparation for the position of superintendent. The mentees gained opportunities to expand their knowledge beyond their own expertise, which they believed was critical in their later success due to the complex role and responsibilities of the position.

Research related to female superintendents and their use of mentors has been limited to demographic descriptors that profile the mentor (MacArthur, 2010). Moore's (2012) research expanded an understanding of the role of mentoring for the success of female superintendents in California through an examination of formal and informal networks with the use of an online questionnaire administered to 57 female superintendents, followed by nine open-ended interviews of the superintendents. The data from the study shed light on mentoring roles and the relationships between the mentor and mentee; much mentoring was done by direct supervisors. Many female participants were paired with a female mentor; others were paired with a male mentor. This is more common because there are more males in positions of authority, which provide more males for the role of mentor (Sherman, Munoz, & Pankake, 2008). The mentors initially mentored the aspiring female superintendents to step out of their comfort zones and take the next step in their careers. As female superintendents built their relationships within formal networks, they also transitioned to become members of informal networks. Findings also suggested that female mentees felt more comfortable with female mentors because they believed they understood their unique challenges in the position. These conclusions highlight the importance of matching mentees with mentors.

Mentor Matching/Relationship

As previously stated, many organizations use mentoring as a form of professional development, but often overlooked the importance of making sure there is a good match between the mentor and mentee. Correctly matching a mentor and mentee has a significant impact on the outcomes for not only the protégé but also the mentor. An ineffective match may be a key determinant of the success of the mentor project (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

The quality of the relationship is determined by the closeness of the fit and can be thought of as having optimal conditions and minimal conditions for a relationship to be created and continued. Optimal conditions, although a theoretical ideal, are those in which both mentor and mentee are satisfied to the fullest extent. Bozeman and Feeney (2008) stated:

We feel that mentoring relationships should in most cases be viewed as a sub optimization process, seeking the best possible fit between different and possibly conflicting preferences, the product of a social exchange, focusing not only on the motivations and needs of the protégé, but also of the mentor and, ultimately, of the two jointly (i.e., the dyad). (p. 471)

Research conducted in the organization named Perach (the Hebrew acronym for Mentoring Project) by Goldner and Mayselless (2009) found the quality of relationship between mentors and mentees was significant. In a quantitative study of 84 mentees over an eight-month span, the researchers conducted pre- and post-assessments, as well as administered a mentoring contribution questionnaire specifically designed for the study. The study demonstrated a clear association between the quality of the mentor relationship and the improvement of the mentee. These results aligned with previous studies (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005).

In Ehrlich, Hansford, and Tennent's (2004) review of 300 research-based papers on mentoring, unsuccessful matches between mentors and mentees were reported in 17% of related studies for mentors and almost 13% of mentee studies. These mis-matches stemmed from personality, ideology, or expertise differences. The mentors expressed anxiety concerning limited access or limited time spent with their mentees, assisting mentees who were at a different level than themselves, and about how mentees' teaching philosophies differed from their own. Other studies showed that personality differences were the main

reason for the failures of the mentor/mentee relationships (Ehrich, Hansford, & Ehrich, 2011).

The importance of selecting a qualified and competent mentor must not be understated for the success of administrators. In the field of education, 29 states clearly define who is eligible to serve as a mentor teacher, and 27 of those states address issues related to mentor assignments (Goldrick, 2016). In order for those teachers to serve as a mentor, they must meet qualifications that include teaching experience, communication and interpersonal skills, and teaching excellence. Years of teaching experience and/or the person holding a professional teaching license is a main factor for successful mentoring; the requirement for the length of teaching is usually a minimum of between three to five years. While states clearly define these qualifications for mentor teachers, there are not as many qualifications, if any, for administrators and superintendents. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) stated that their early career support mentor program for principals would have an enhanced process to match mentors with mentees but did not provide details about the specifics of the program (Scott, 2011). As a result, mentor and mentee matches for administrators and especially superintendents must rely on other factors to help with the fit of the match.

Thessin, Clayton, and Jamison (2018) incorporated a case study through the use of weekly log forms, journals, observations, and interviews over a four-month period to examine the relationship between the mentor and the aspiring administrator. They found the relationship develops through three phases: establishing the partnership, cultivating the mentoring relationship, and learning through the leadership experience. In the first phase of establishing the partnership, Thessin, Clayton, and Jamison found the partnership depended

on the mentee's readiness for and commitment to the work. The second and third phases of the relationship relied more heavily on the mentor with the mentor providing opportunities to assume leadership roles and build trust, and when ready, for mentees to assume full leadership responsibilities. The study's results also informed the creation of the Education Leadership Mentoring Framework, which is a conceptual framework that could strengthen the quality of administrative internship experiences.

There remains extremely narrow literature in regard to mentor matching and the relationship between mentors and mentees related to the position of superintendents. Much information is a by-product of studies focused on mentoring matching between teachers to teacher mentoring and teacher to building administrator mentoring. Additionally, Copeland and Calhoun (2014) discovered a subtheme in their research on mentor matching.

A descriptive mixed methods study on the mentoring experiences of female students in a Southeastern state was conducted by Copeland and Calhoun (2014). Thirty-nine study participants participated in three different surveys, and of those, eight were selected for semi-structured interviews. Interviews revealed all participants indicated that their overall mentoring experiences were beneficial. Furthermore, a sub-theme that appeared was the importance of a good relationship and support. One participant found that matching her with a mentor superintendent with a complementary personality proved key to the relationship and, in turn, the success of the relationship.

Creating a good match between mentor and mentee is key to the success of the partnership throughout all organizations of mentoring. In education, mentor matching and creating a goodness of fit will allow the mentee to gain crucial knowledge and experience for their position. A poor match can have just as detrimental an effect as a good match on

the success of the partnership. The success of mentoring can also be affected positively and negatively depending on the characteristics of the mentor or the mentee.

Characteristics

The effectiveness of the mentor relationship quality is based on both the mentor and the mentee. As a result, there are certain characteristics that each individual possesses that aid in making an effective mentor relationship. Mentors should be selected based on their moral and ethical behaviors. They should have strong professional dispositions and qualities that will contribute to a positive learning expertise for the mentee. The mentor should also have a strong background in all areas of schooling such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, operations of the school, and establishing a positive culture of the school (Griffin et al., 2012). Eby, Butts, Lockwood, and Simon (2004) concurred, as they found lack of mentor expertise as a component that could positively or negatively impact overall mentor experiences. The other four areas that could have an impact on experiences were “mismatch within dyad, distancing behavior, manipulative behavior, and general dysfunctionality” (p. 102). Crow and Matthews (1998) further confirmed this finding as they highlighted that uncommitted and weak mentors can have a detrimental effect on mentees.

In a study of mentoring leaders, Daresh (2004) concentrated on factors that contributed to the success or lack of success of mentor programs. The researcher found that time constraints of the administrator who serves as the mentor can lessen the positive effects of the relationship. Another finding was that the characteristics of communication and mutual beneficence emerged as two key characteristics in effective mentoring relationships. The effectiveness of a relationship is strongly based on communication skills between both parties. As mentors and mentees communicate, there are characteristics in the development

of the communication structure, style of communication, and trust that manifest as critical components of an effective mentoring relationship (Thessin et al., 2018).

Hale (2000) found that this communication can take the form of four main mechanisms: mentors sharing their stories and experiences, discussing the key political issues faced at higher levels of the organization, describing the strategies and activities taking place within the organization, and engaging in reflection. Huang and Weng (2012) built on this importance of communication in their study and suggested that the closer the mentee and mentor were in their thinking style, the more agreeable the communication was between them. This communication enhanced the trust between both. Research shows a “highly socially skilled mentoring pair is capable of building a more trusting, enduring, and pleasant relationship” (Wu, Turban, & Cheung, 2012, p. 56). This in turn improves the communication and benefits of the interaction between the mentor and the mentee. Sherman and Crum (2009) echoed this sentiment and believed the conversations and dialogue between both can improve practice and create value for both parties. Furthermore, Long (2014) confirmed that listening is a key characteristic of mentoring and contended that effective communication must impart the elements of trust, safety, and empathy.

The second key characteristic of an effective mentor relationship is mutual beneficence. Mutual beneficence means that both the mentor and mentee benefit and develop from the interaction. Mutual beneficence improves the mentor experience for both parties, leading to an increased investment in the process for both parties. Daresh (2004) and Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) in their investigations both reported that the most productive interactions were when the mentors felt they were learning just as much from the experience as the mentees. This knowledge building was reciprocal and established mutual

benefits regarding opportunities to share, reflect, and grow. Kram's (1985) conceptual model of mentor relationships demonstrated how the relationship can be mutually beneficial and outlined a process of four distinct phases that contributed to establishing relationships: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. Through each of the phases, both mentor and mentee were influenced by the relationship and continued to grow. Unfortunately, it takes anywhere from two to five years for mentees and mentors to enter the separation and redefinition phases (the most beneficial), but by that time most mentor programs are complete.

Overall, the mentor and mentee relationship should involve key characteristics to increase the effectiveness of the partnership. Having strong backgrounds and expertise allows mentors to positively impact the mentor experience. Through a review of relevant studies, communication and mutual beneficence were identified as significant characteristics that can affect (positively or negatively) mentor and mentee relationships. Just as aspiring leaders are not born but rather trained, professional development and training should be available for mentors as they take on the task of mentoring.

Professional Development for Mentors

In order for mentors to provide professional development and training for others, they too must cultivate themselves. Although schools sometimes tie financial incentives for administrator mentoring, many mentors volunteer their valuable time and effort. Currently, more than 30 states require training for teacher mentors, though state policies do not entail guidelines regarding the content and delivery of such training. Those states that do communicate the training components for teacher mentors include knowledge of the state teaching standards, formative assessment of new teacher performance, classroom

observation, reflective conversations, and adult learning theory. Different states offer their mentor training through licensed mentor training organizations, while others place the responsibility on school districts. Eighteen of those states require ongoing professional development for mentors in order to support them and to provide the opportunity to deepen their mentor skills (Goldrick, 2016). Training of mentors should be as extensive as possible, because research evidence shows that satisfying, effective mentoring relationships are associated with greater time spent on mentor training (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000).

While empirical studies focused on mentor training studies remain scarce, Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, and McMaken (2007) conducted a random assignment impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring program. Through this study of 1,139 nine- to sixteen-year-olds in 71 schools, the researchers observed the impact of the program on the youth. Through baseline surveys, the researchers asked questions focused on the training mentors received. The researchers found that mentors, regardless of their age, reported receiving similar amounts and quality of training to support them during the course of their match. This training came from an outside agency that was responsible for recruiting and training mentors. The researchers also found that those mentors who spent more time in training continued into a second year of mentoring. It is important for mentors to be trained in the art of mentoring and know effective strategies of mentoring to improve the mentor experience.

Conclusion

This section began by presenting a variety of definitions of mentoring and the historical foundations of mentoring, which has been utilized throughout different levels of

education from new teachers to the highest level of superintendent roles. Through each position, leaders require different knowledge and skills from their mentors. This plays into the importance of mentor and mentee matching and the relationship between the two. Correctly matching a mentor and mentee can have a significant impact for not only the mentee but also the mentor. Mentors should have strong professional dispositions and robust backgrounds in all areas of schooling. Lastly, those serving as mentors should receive as much professional development as possible in order to be most effective. In the next section, I explore the variety of leadership styles and skills associated with educational leadership needed by superintendents to take on the challenges in the twenty-first century school district. These leadership styles and skills are influenced by their professional educational backgrounds, networking and collaborating with others, and mentoring opportunities.

Twenty-first Century Leadership

Students spend an astounding amount of time in the educational setting the first 18 years of their lives. Jackson (1990) drew attention to the time spent in the school setting, highlighting that elementary school students spend around 7,000 hours in school during the beginning phase of their education. While that is only around one-tenth of their total time, it is significant when noting that one-third of the total time is spent sleeping. To highlight these significant aspects, the author draws a comparison to going to church. Spending time in school is equivalent to spending a full Sunday in church for 24 straight years. He states, “the fact of prolonged exposure in either setting increases in its meaning as we begin to consider the elements of repetition, redundancy and ritualistic action that are experienced there” (Jackson, 1990, p. 119).

With students spending a significant amount of time in the school setting, superintendents must be prepared to structure the settings so that all will find success. These tasks do not end with concerns for student success; superintendents must also manage the school organization that includes teachers, support staff, parents, and community stakeholders. Levine (2005) stated that superintendents are no longer just supervisors; they are now being asked to lead in the redesign of their schools and their school systems. To do this, leaders must possess a variety of leadership skills and theories in order to enact the change needed for their schools. Likewise, they must be aware of present issues and trends in the educational setting in the twenty-first century in order to effectively make change.

Superintendents must possess strong leadership skills in order to lead organizations to overcome the existing challenges. One such challenge is ensuring and securing equitable funding for their districts. Due to the economic crisis in 2006 dubbed the Great Recession, states implemented unprecedented cuts to public education, which still have not been restored to pre-Recession levels (Leachman, Albares, Masterson, & Wallace, 2016). The Great Recession accounted for substantial budget cuts and staff layoffs (Goldhaber, Strunk, Brown, & Knight, 2016), and those districts hit hardest served greater proportions of students in poverty and culturally diverse students (Baker, 2014). Between local, state, and the federal government, school districts are being asked to do more with students, with less money.

Another challenge is addressing issues of race, class, poverty, and special education as social justice concerns to promote equity for all students. The shifting American landscape has moved from the predominately White population centered in Western culture to a society with a wide and rich array of racial and ethnic groups. This shift also includes a

variety of beliefs and cultures. While non-Hispanic Whites have been and currently are the majority, by 2042, that will no longer be the case (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). With this growing diversity, students are situating themselves to be a part of their community and develop a sense of belonging. Mitchell (2018) elaborated that with the changing landscape of America, schools are celebrating diversity and are working toward inclusive practices that aim for the maximum development of the person, their presence, and their participation in different areas of society.

The changing American landscape has also resulted in more students experiencing trauma. More than two-thirds of students have experienced a traumatic event by the age 16. These events include psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; community or school violence; witnessing or experiencing domestic violence; national disasters or terrorism; commercial sexual exploitation; sudden or violent loss of a loved one; refugee or war experiences; military family-related stressors (e.g., deployment, parental loss or injury); physical or sexual assault; neglect; or serious accidents or life-threatening illness (Understanding Child Trauma, 2017).

Lastly, superintendents must face the challenge of building leadership capacity throughout their school systems in order to ensure smooth transitions as they will inevitably leave their position, one way or another. By building leadership capacity, new and aspiring leaders will be prepared to enter a leadership position and continue where their previous leaders left off.

Leadership Style

While there is disagreement on defining what leadership is, one commonality that can be found across existing leadership literature is that leadership is important (Gandolfi &

Stone, 2018). Gandolfi (2016) stated there is a combination of five components to render or create a working definition of leadership: There must be one or more leaders; leadership must have followers; leadership must be action oriented, have a legitimate course of action; and there must be goals and objectives. Winston and Patterson (2006) met this criterion by defining leadership and noting how it demonstrates leadership as non-one-dimensional:

A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives.
(p. 7)

While this is a current, working definition of leadership, Buchanan (2013) stated that the world has moved through different phases of leadership since the early part of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, the concept of "common and control" was prevalent, which was followed by "empower and track" through the mid 2000s, and now currently, leadership is in a state of "connect and nurture."

Regardless of disagreements on defining current leadership, Chaleff (2009) drew attention to leadership as a social accomplishment, since it requires a group effort of leaders and followers to reach a common purpose. Leaders emerge through these social interactions and accomplishments. While the age-old saying states that "leaders are born, not made," Andersen (2012) contended that while some people are born with innate qualities and character attributes to help propel them in their leadership journey, a vast majority of people live in a practical reality in which leadership skills must be intentionally cultivated through their experiences. The leader's responsibility is to move the organization to a future

state or goal without losing sight of those who work to get it there, which is an extremely difficult balancing act (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

As a result, superintendents in the twenty-first century must possess the appropriate leadership style in order to navigate the challenges they encounter through their positions. Mellon (2011) focused on the importance of leadership as leadership styles (as well as their strategies) and how they factor into the success of a superintendent, especially considering how many stakeholders the superintendent relates to and reports to on a daily basis. Weak leadership “sounds the death knell for any superintendent” (p. 72). Poor leadership takes its toll on every imaginable stakeholder from those inside and outside the organizations (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Sharp and Walter (2011) added that “style depends on a manager’s [superintendent’s] personality, prior experiences, and how he or she has been treated by former principals and superintendents” (p. 63). How a leader chooses to behave, or in more academic terminology, how a leader accesses a repertoire of styles, may profoundly impact the various stakeholders. When leadership is ineffective, absent, or toxic, the result is people, organizations, communities, and even entire societies are impacted, sometimes in the most devastating ways (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Hence, it is important to note that a leadership type is the leadership style the leader defaults to naturally while a leadership style refers to the method of leadership the leader chooses at the time to address the situation.

Due to the ever-changing landscape of the position, superintendents must be able to apply a combination of leadership styles contextually, according to the needs of the role they are filling. This highlights the need for superintendents to have flexibility, which can be a key to their long-term success. A leadership style or strategy that works in one context

may fail completely in another. While a significant body of research exists addressing various leadership styles, there is a surprising shortage of research examining the notion of a leadership “style” (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). The following, in alphabetical order, are a variety of popular and effective leadership styles which twenty-first century superintendents can draw from depending on the context of the situation.

Authentic leadership. This style of leadership began in the business world and is now progressing into education. Superintendents who utilize authentic leadership use experiences from their own lives and the experiences they have encountered. As such, authentic leaders are influenced by their own perspectives of life and their past work experiences. George and Sims (2007) stated:

When asked what motivates them to lead, authentic leaders consistently say they find their motivation through understanding their own stories...The stories of authentic leaders cover the full spectrum of life’s experiences. They include the impact of parents, teachers, coaches and mentors who recognized their potential; the impact of their communities, and their leadership in team sports, scouting, student government and early employment. Many leaders find their motivation comes from a difficult experience in their lives: personal illness or the illness of a family member; death of a parent or a sibling; or feelings of being excluded, discriminated against or rejected by peers...all [authentic] leaders...find their passion to lead through the uniqueness of their life stories. (p. 8)

Superintendents who utilize this style rely on their experiences as teachers, leaders, and administrators to make informed decisions. These experiences help them understand who they are as leaders and their purposes within school systems. They possess the traits of self-awareness, confidence, resiliency, and optimism while also being able to empathize with different people and situations (Bird & Wang, 2011). Due to these traits, this style of leadership can aid superintendents in navigating and uniting often deeply divided school

boards and communities. These traits also allow superintendents to build on the strengths of their followers to enact organizational change throughout the school system.

Autocratic leadership. Leaders possessing this style of leadership are those who possess power and do not hesitate to use it. The hierarchical structure places superintendents in the position to wield the most power, and the style of leadership demands error-free outcomes. It is the complete opposite of a democratic leader. Autocratic leaders make their employees do their jobs without the right to choose and, as the leader, they make all strategic decisions (Ferguson, 2011). As such, this style of leadership is the least popular style of leadership, but is used throughout the business world and education today. Some popular autocratic leaders were U.S. General George Patton, Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, oil tycoon John Rockefeller, and past U.S. President Richard Nixon.

Benevolent leadership. Karakas and Sarigollu (2011) defined benevolent leadership as a process of

creating a virtuous cycle of encouraging and initiating positive change in organizations through (a) ethical decision making, (b) creating a sense of meaning, (c) inspiring hope and fostering courage for positive action, and (d) leaving a positive impact for the larger community. (p. 537)

Leaders who utilize this style of leadership are those who try to create observable benefits, actions, or results for the good of the person or organization. This style of leadership is effective with those who have a disenchantment with leaders, which Maccoby (2000) pointed out as growing due to leaders abusing their power and acting selfishly.

Superintendents using this leadership style act out of whole-heartedness and guide actions to help those around them. Benevolent leaders work to create common good in organizational contexts and work toward a positive change in human systems (Karakas & Sarigollu, 2011).

Charismatic leadership. This style of leadership is characterized by those leaders who garner support from staff. Riggio and Conger (2012) noted that these leaders are very skilled communicators who are verbally eloquent and reach their followers on a deep level. These leaders articulate a compelling or captivating vision and can elicit strong emotions from their followers. Charismatic leadership relies on charm and persuasiveness of the leader to get their members to make the status quo better. This style of leadership resembles that of an autocratic leader (mentioned previously), but the difference is inspiring employees to perform. Charismatic leaders are those who have developed an alert eye and mind from their past experiences and understanding their organizations. Ray and Ray (2011) stated, “Charismatic leaders have the ability to sense the gap that exists between what an organization is delivering to its followers, and what the followers need from an organization” (p. 56). Bull (1979) even affirmed that the twenty-first century is the time of the charismatic leader. Superintendents utilizing this leadership style display characteristics that include characteristics such as sensitivity to their environment and the needs of their employees or followers, articulate and visionary, inclined toward personal risk taking, and adept at using unconventional behavior (Conger, 1999). These traits allow others to easily see the target or goal, and the employees are motivated to contribute to the common goal.

Collaborative leadership. Leaders who use this style of leaderships do not act as the leader of the people but as the leader of a process in conjunction with people. Rabinowitz (2018) noted that while collaborative leadership can be practiced in a variety of models or ways, collaborative leaders typically share the same specific traits. The first trait is the leader’s job is not to decide the direction, rather to focus the effort on collaborative problem solving and decision making. The second trait is the open process that emphasizes the

collaboration between all participants. The last specific trait of collaborative leadership is the leader is there to help the work rather than leading those involved toward a certain direction or a determination. All of these traits provide advantages of buy-in from employees, involvement in the implementation, and the process builds trust. Lawrence (2017) noted that “collaborative leadership is characterized by shared vision and values, interdependence and shared responsibility, mutual respect, empathy and willingness to be vulnerable, ambiguity, effective communication, and synergy” (p. 91). Superintendents who utilize this style of leadership rely on the collective intelligence of the group to come up with a decision and believe that everyone working together can be smarter and more competent than one single person.

Constructivist leadership. A constructivist leader is one who seeks understanding through asking questions, repeating what is said in different forms, and clarifying what has been said so others can seek out connections to make meaning of various ideas (Lynch, 2018). Working from a constructivist approach, in which the social world develops out of individual interactions, this leadership style involves working with others to make connections. Constructivist leaders are not always filling the role of leader or the person who teaches but is someone who facilitates the learning of others. This process of facilitation involves active listening and reframing what is said so that learners can build and stimulate their knowledge. These leaders allow others to build on their previous experiences and incorporate new learning (Densten & Gray, 2001).

Distributed leadership. This style of leadership is a process in which roles and responsibilities are distributed among others, formally recognized or not (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Spillane (2005) elaborated further by stating that through the

distributed leadership perspective, leadership is not considered as a school leader's characteristics, knowledge or skills, but as a process based on daily interactions or functions of multiple leaders in the school and the situation, including organizational routines, structures, and tools. Situations might even involve multiple school leaders collaborating to solve challenging problems or make difficult decisions. Superintendents, especially in large systems, recognize they cannot effectively management all aspects required of them and often choose distributed leadership in order to manage effectively. Saadi et al. (2009) stated that distributed leadership is effective in school systems in which collegiality and cooperation already exist. School systems and communities with democratic values and a devolution of power provide a conducive environment for this leadership style. It should be noted that distributed leadership is oppositional to typical hierarchical structures of schools, as leadership boundaries are often blurred.

Emotional leadership. An emotional leader is a leader who uses their influence with their followers toward a common goal. Morton (2012) drew attention to this leadership process as it is centered on influence as a way to sway others to behave in certain manners. As such, leaders should act ethically and demonstrate emotional intelligence. This emotional intelligence is the ability or capacity to assess and manage the emotions of oneself, others, and of a group of people. Humphrey (2002) focused on the importance of emotional leadership as “a key leadership function to manage the emotions of group members” (p. 498). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) offered two suggestions for emotional leaders in order to be effective. The first was that the leader must be able to drive the collective emotions in a positive direction and dismiss or clear the toxic emotions present. Secondly, leaders must be able to motivate those around them to perform through resonance,

the ability of leaders to get the best out of their followers. To do this, the Bar-On Model of Emotional and Social Intelligence, the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Model of Emotional Intelligence, and the Goleman Model of Emotional Intelligence are three emotional intelligence models leaders can use. All three have overlapping areas and common themes that stress ways in which the leaders can recognize and manage the emotions of their followers (Morton, 2012). Four key skills superintendents must master to be effective emotional leaders include the skill to perceive emotions, use emotions to facilitate activities, understand emotions as states of being in ever-changing relationships, and manage emotions both within themselves and others.

Invitational leadership. Created by Purkey and Siegel (2003), this style of leadership is a model of several leadership qualities, values, and principles blended together. Purkey and Siegel stated that the intention of an invitational leadership style embraces leaders to pursue a purposeful life for others in the community, shifting the focus from control and dominance to connectedness, cooperation, and communication. This style of leadership aims to invite all interested stakeholders to come together to participate and create synergy as all work toward the common goal. Through this holistic approach to leadership, Purkey and Siegel stated leaders embrace the four principles of the model: respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality. Respect is defined as believing all people within the process are valuable and should be treated in a caring manner. Trust involves believing all people have abilities and integrity. Optimism gives rise to believing that all people have potential and that everyone is capable of self-direction. Lastly, intentionality implies that leaders have “a choice and desire to be respectful, trustworthy, and optimistic” (Purkey &

Siegel, 2003, p. 20). These four principles are then applied to the total environment, known as the “Five Ps”: people, places, policies, programs, and processes (Novak & Purkey, 2001).

The first of the Five Ps, people exist as the most important aspect for leaders as they develop relationships by exhibiting the principles of respect and trust. Invitational leaders create positive relationships by focusing on communal environments and commitments to other employees, students, and/or colleagues (Purkey & Siegel, 2003). The next, places, entails the physical environment, which is a positive setting that imposes a level of “morale, satisfaction, productivity, creativity, and customer service” (p. 118). The third of the Five Ps, policies, represents the ideas and feelings of the people who create the written or unwritten directives, codes, and rules (Novak & Purkey, 2001). Next, programs are designed to work for the benefit of everyone. These programs, created through a collaborative process, should continue to convey respect and trust. Stanley, Juhnke, and Purkey (2004) noted that an important aspect of the programs is to make sure they do not portray elitist, sexist, or discrimination features that could affect the purpose of the program. The last of the Five Ps, processes, is the “bottom line” of the invitational leadership style as it reveals how the other four Ps come together to support a culture of respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality. The invitational leader creates and establishes processes through a collaborative effort with others in the organization. While these Five Ps are the substance of what is present, McKnight and Martin (2015) noted other absent characteristics. They stated the powerfulness of the principles and the environment, but also the powerfulness of intentional uninviting, unintentional disinviting, unintentional inviting, and intentional inviting. All have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the invitational leadership style.

Laissez-faire leadership. This style of leadership extends from the French phrase of “let it be,” and leaders who utilize this style of leadership do not emphasize performance or people. Laissez-faire leadership may be the best or worst style of leadership (Goodnight, 2011). Fiaz, Qin, Ikram, and Sagib (2017) stated that this style of leadership is based on the philosophical assumption that humans are unpredictable and uncontrollable and as such, it is a waste of time and energy to control them. Wong and Giessner (2015) asserted that developing employees is not the focus of laissez-faire leadership and that employees can take care of themselves. These leaders avoid making decisions and communication with employees unless needed. Laissez-faire leaders give their teams and subordinates the freedom to complete their work on their own timeline (Chaudhry & Jayed, 2012) and reduce their roles to monitoring performance and giving feedback. This autonomy leads to high job satisfaction and increased productivity. Unfortunately, this style of leadership is damaging if team members do not manage their time or do not have the skills to do their work effectively.

Strategic leadership. Leaders who utilize this style apply strategic techniques to persuade stakeholders in the education community to achieve organizational objectives and goals (Adair, 2010). A strategic leader is at the head of the entire organization, the superintendent, who has a number of operational leaders under their personal direction that work to achieve their goals. Norzailan, Yusof, and Othman (2016) stated that strategic leadership involves innovative and divergent thinking so that leaders can find alternative ways to compete. The researchers believe that strategic thinking is associated with disrupting current attitudes and perspectives, working with problems at hand as well as in the future, and encouraging long term thinking, creativity, and intelligence. Superintendents

choosing this style of leadership much have the appropriate knowledge and qualities to provide the functions for teams to achieve their tasks. Khumalo (2018) described seven functions of strategic leaders: (a) giving direction for the organization as a whole; (b) strategic thinking and strategic planning; (c) making it happen, relating the parts to the whole; (d) building key partnerships and other social relationships; (e) releasing the corporate spirit; and (f) choosing and developing leaders for today and tomorrow. Strategic leadership relies on the leader having the ability and wisdom to make decisions, act, and navigate situations for the benefit of the organization. Chan (2017) further elaborated on the attributes that strategic leaders demonstrate as collaborative oriented, interdisciplinary focused, integrated visionary, diverse networking, time extensive focused, and contextualized intelligence.

Servant leadership. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) noted that servant leadership dates back thousands of years as ancient monarchs widely acknowledged that their leadership was for the service of the people. Servant leaders take the notion of service for people and apply it to education through service for children (students). Many educational leadership styles focus on first the mission and then empowering followers to carry out the mission. Servant leaders first direct focus on the abilities of individuals to succeed, then the success of the goal (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Servant leadership requires the leader to put their own needs after the needs of those they serve, differentiating it from many other styles of leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). These leaders help their followers to achieve their goals and succeed, which advances the mission of the organization (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Working from the moral perspective, servant leadership assumes that followers will maximize their potential under this style of leadership, which will then directly impact their

performances. Manby (2012) and Stone (2015) confirmed that when servant leadership is applied appropriately, an authentic and natural form of reciprocity takes place between leaders and followers leading to increased engagement and organizational performance.

Transactional leadership. This leadership style, according to Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009), is defined as highly focused on the exchange of rewards contingent on the performance of followers. Leaders who utilize this style are generally in positions of power and rely on behaviorist views of human activity, using rewards and punishment as forms of controlling people (Khan, 2017). Superintendents who utilize this style of leadership support the adherence to policy, regulations, and maintaining or re-establishing the status quo. They direct and push forward more efficiently by clarifying roles and tasks requirements, and then link them to rewards and punishment. Robbins (2003) pointed out that this style is especially effective in crisis situations and during chaotic times of uncertainty. Leaders who utilize this approach focus on the reward and benefit system to motivate their followers. With leaders providing followers a reward for reaching or achieving a target, leaders tend not to recognize followers' contributions beyond the goal that was initially set, and they do not give incentives for going beyond the achieved target (Benjamin, 2016). Due to the structures and punishment/rewards put in place, this style of leadership does not allow for flexibility or a willingness to change strategy when internal or external issues arise, which occurs often in educational organizations.

Transformational leadership. Originally coined by James Burns in his book *Leadership* (1978), transformational leaders focus on altering followers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to a higher realm of motivation. The leader inspires followers to be motivated to rise above their current level of achievement and performance to an even higher level of

such. Further, Bass (1985) stated that transformational leadership is defined as a process in which leaders and followers work together to advance motivation and morale. Although created over 30 years ago, Dinh, Lord, Meuser, Liden, and Hu (2014) gave note to the rising popularity of transformational leadership; from 2000 to 2012, it was the most investigated and debated leadership theory. Oplatka (2014) also referred to its rise in popularity as transformational theory and style has been integrated in many textbooks in the field of educational administration and frequently addressed in training programs for administrators. Although Bass and Riggio (2006) stated that transformational leadership is an extension of transactional leadership by inspiring followers to commit to a vision and goal, they argued that transformational leaders also challenge problem solvers. These leaders want to develop and build leadership capacity within their followers through mentoring, coaching, and supporting.

Through transformational leadership, Northouse (2007) contended, the organization's effectiveness increases because leadership is concerned with emotions, vision, mission, and goals, ethics, and values. It also increases when it meets the needs of the followers and develops leadership capacity. Wu, Neubert, and Yi (2007) stated that transformational leaders focus and target followers' views, values, and abilities in order to encourage them to put aside their own interests and act for the good of the whole. Going beyond is echoed by Saint-Michel (2018) who spoke of leaders inspiring their followers to go beyond their personal goals in order to advance the collective mission of the organization. Superintendents utilizing this style of leadership find it effective to address school restructuring, pressures of performance, and using reform initiatives to change schools (Berkovich, 2016). School leaders draw upon leadership practices that include

building vision, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning program (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Kowalski (2006) stated:

The superintendent of the 21st century must apply transformational leadership to build: A shared vision of the school; create...and align...school and district goals; create...an intellectually stimulating environment; nurture...a positive, learning oriented culture; provide...individual support and development opportunities; model...best practices and learning-oriented organizational values; create...authentic organizational structures that support shared decision making venues, [and] establish...high expectations for student and adult learning. (p. 213)

In short, school superintendents must develop and hone their own leadership style in response to the district or situation they are leading. This style can change as the superintendent moves from district to district or as a need for style change is warranted. Bird and Wang (2013) contended that leaders' flexibility and fluidity in their leadership style in performing their duties and responsibilities will determine superintendents' successes or lack thereof. Bird and Wang noted that the application of any classical leadership style to a situation will always be better received by followers if the leader's intentions and actions are authentic. Just as there are different leadership styles that allow superintendents to manage their jobs, supervise employees, and work with others, there are also different leadership theories that undergird those styles. Each style provides positives and negatives as superintendents address the challenges that face their districts.

Current Challenges

Superintendents in the twenty-first century will experience situations and challenges different from any other superintendents in history. Although each school district faces unique challenges depending on their situation, education throughout the United States faces similar challenges and obstacles. Gallup Inc., an American consulting company, conducted a 2017 survey of over 2,300 K-12 school district superintendents. Through internet interviews

and surveys, the researchers asked questions about current and future challenges they believed directly impact superintendents. Of the eight challenges presented in the survey, superintendents stated that their districts' greatest challenges are helping students whose circumstances alter their achievement and dealing with budget shortfalls. These perceived challenges are similar across district size, but superintendents from larger districts are more likely to list, when asked, that improving underprepared students is a challenge for their districts. The challenge of revamping curriculum has fallen from the previous survey, conducted in 2013, from 69% strongly agree to 50% strongly agree, as superintendents have adapted curriculum to meet the demands of twenty-first century learners.

The findings from the Gallup (2017) survey align with Gober's (2012) phenomenological case study of superintendents. Gober used the internet to interview six superintendents from five states (Kansas, Washington, Arizona, Texas, and California) that belonged to the Western States Benchmarking Consortium. When asked about pressing issues the superintendents perceived they faced, their answers were unique to their districts but also indicated common themes. Superintendent A listed continued shortfall of funding for public education. Superintendent B focused on the challenge of school models stemming from swift changes in how students are matriculated through grades, especially with outside competition competing for money. Similarly, Superintendent C was focused on school's models of virtual schooling and their effects on public education. Superintendent D believed the challenge of public support/funding, digital learning, changing demographics, and performance management would be the most challenging aspects in the future. Superintendent E focused on the challenge of addressing the needs of students in a swiftly changing society, and Superintendent F perceived the challenge involved meeting the

educational needs of students with far less funding. The common themes between both studies highlight some challenge most likely faced by the twenty-first century superintendents who must have the knowledge of how current trends will affect their districts. The following are current snapshot of issues within education that twenty-first century superintendents might face.

Equitable funding. United States K-12 public schools vary greatly in their quality, as documented by a wide range of studies, and these differences are often cited as major contributors to achievement gaps which are viewed as connected to parental socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2016). Equitable funding for schools will continue to be a challenge faced by superintendents in the twenty-first century, as schools which can spend more per pupil provide students with a plethora of resources as opposed to other schools which struggle to provide basic material for class. Samuel's (2016) study noted that education is often paid for with the amount of money available to a district, but that money does not necessarily equal the amount of money required to adequately teach students. School district spending, especially in poor or low-income districts, can irreparably damage a student's future. In a study conducted by Jackson, Johnson, and Persico (2016), the researchers found that nationwide, a 10% increase in per-pupil spending each year for 12 years of public education leads to 0.27 more completed years of education, 7.25% higher wages, and a 3.67%-point reduction in the annual incidence of adult poverty. The researchers found the effects even more pronounced for children from low-income families, drawing the connection that increases in spending are directly linked to improvements in measured school quality. Due to litigation on equitable school funding in almost every state, the federal government is working to aid schools, but recognizes that education is the largest

single component of government spending, accounting for 7.3% of GDP across the federal, state, and local expenditures (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). With all the money going into education, Wyman-Blackburn (2018) pointed to the struggle of breaking down the equity of dollars when they are reported centrally and not individually as schools. Superintendents must continue to work at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure equitable funding for their students so they can provide the education their students need in order to be successful.

Minoritized populations. Another key challenge faced by superintendents is minoritized populations of students. Students are not born into minoritized statuses; instead, students are rendered or become minoritized in particular situations and environments in which there is an over representation of Whiteness (Harper, 2012). Inclusive efforts to also meet the needs of other minoritized or marginalized groups of students such as indigenous groups, special education students, and LGBTQ students are likely to create climate issues within schools and districts. While most school or district mottos aim to be inclusive by stating “All Means All” in their mission statements, the reality is all students who already fit in means all, which generally include White European American middle-class students. Wang (2015, 2016) drew attention to educational leadership and the issues of race, class, poverty, special education, and school safety as current challenges. Educational leaders must respond to these challenges and concerns as social justice advocates to promote equity for all (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Potter, Torres, & Briceno, 2014; Taysum & Gunter, 2008).

DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) stated that all social justice endeavors involve recognizing the unequal circumstances of marginalized groups with actions directed toward

eliminating the inequalities. Addressing social justice can be done through democratic participation in decision making, transformation of inequitable social arrangements, inclusive practices in response to diversity, and critical awareness in leadership practice (Wang, 2018). Superintendents must be aware of the obstacles to the social justice commitment as they include issues of resources as school leaders feel they must do more with less. This calls for leaders to “recognize how our habits restrict equity and social justice and then to find ways to overcome these constraints” (Shields, 2004, p. 113).

Special education. Special education students are members of a marginalized group that often encounter inequalities and unequal circumstances in the school setting. Superintendents and school leaders faced by pressure to improve academic accountability through test scores, often pass those pressures to teachers whose job it is to make the academic gains. Rueda and Windmueller (2006) pointed out that with the advent and dominance of testing, regular education teachers are referring and advocating for special education placements for an increasing number of students. Skiba et al. (2018) echoed this statement and believed that anything that teachers can do to segregate the students needing more help, will be pursued. This should not be the case, and all students, regardless of exceptionalities, should be provided an inclusive education. While inclusive education is a broad term, Shyman (2015) stated that inclusive education is one in which “all individuals, regardless of exceptionality, are entitled to the opportunity to be included in regular classroom environments while receiving the supports necessary to facilitate accessibility to both environment and information” (p. 351).

An inclusive educational experience for students who receive special education services also provides an ability to be involved in and make progress in the general

education curriculum as well as provide an opportunity to meet challenging objectives. This is highlighted in the *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1* (No. 15-827) (2017) United States Supreme Court case which rejected the “de minimis” (too trivial or minor to consider) standard for special education students progress. Chief Justice Roberts stated that schools must now further increase their educational expectations for children with disabilities and consider each child’s individual strengths and weaknesses when developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Superintendents must address these new higher expectations for progress as their responsibilities include managing the district’s educational resources and supervision of all school personnel. This allows them to play a critical role in the administration of special education in their districts.

While superintendents work to provide an inclusive environment for students in their districts between the ages of 3 and 21, schools must also prepare special education students for life after graduation. A U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) study found that outcomes for special education students were drastically different from those of their peers. McFarland et al. (2018) found that in 2011–2012, on average across the United States, 40% of students identified as qualifying for special education services did not graduate from high school. These rates reached as high as 80% in two states, while six more states were higher than 60%. This is significant because approximately 13% of all public school students or about 6.7 million students receive special education services. To address these inequities, school leaders can promote collaboration between general and special educators (Huberman, Navo, & Parrish, 2012; Keller-Allen, 2009), support the implementation of evidence-based interventions (Honig &

Coburn, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009), and cultivate positive teacher attitudes toward an inclusive education (Harper & Andrews, 2010; Zaretsky, 2007).

Inclusivity in the general education classroom and post-graduate outcomes are just two of the many challenges superintendents must address regarding special education, but throughout all of this, superintendents must also ensure student education is provided in accordance with current laws and regulations. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) stated that among the central and ongoing struggles for educational leaders are interpreting and applying national policies to meet the needs of local teachers, students, and families. One such national education law, the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA), explicitly states parents' rights to participate in educational decision making for their children and specifies what schools must do to ensure parents have the opportunity to participate in such meetings (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004, section 300.322). Research has shown that effective partnerships and cooperation between schools and parents create more inclusive practices for children (Forlin & Rose, 2010). Taft and Schlein (2017) contended that when families and schools work together to design and implement instruction, development and learning occurs throughout all other environments. Parents are experts about their children, and their participation and input is crucial. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, and Shogren (2015) identified seven principles that should be considered in order to promote such positive and effective partnerships: communication, profession competence, respect, commitment, equity, advocacy, and trust.

Although parent involvement remains a cornerstone for IDEA, many parents encounter barriers when collaborating with school districts (Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) contended that one such barrier is

parents' role during Individualized Education Plan meetings being situated as recipients of information as opposed to sharers of information. Another barrier encountered is when parents advocated for services for their child, schools perceived their participation as a hindrance to the daily operations of the school (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). School teams want to continue to do what they want to do. Another such barrier includes culturally and linguistically diverse families who encounter unique barriers when trying to effectively communicate with school staff. Although culturally and linguistically diverse students are over-represented in special education, their parents' voices are least likely to be heard by school staff (Harry, 2008). Parent feedback is crucial to ensuring the success of special education in the face of the many challenges these students face, and feedback should help inform large-scale efforts for special education reform. Harr (2000) noted that perhaps due to political clout or a lack of resources, individual parents' comments are underrepresented in the IDEA reauthorization process.

Burke and Sandman (2015) conducted a study of 49 parents through a variety of geographical regions of a Midwestern state and recorded their concerns regarding IDEA. The children of the participants ranged from 3 to 30 years old, and the most frequent types of disabilities were autism spectrum disorder (49%), intellectual disability (26.5%), learning disability (18.4%), and developmental disability (16.3%). Across all types of schools, including both the Spanish and English-speaking participants, three themes emerged: parents wanted supports added to IDEA; existing provisions in IDEA to have greater specificity; and the maintenance of stipulations. Participants cited wanting to add the supports of two services to IDEA: applied behavior analysis (ABA) and the regulation of student-to-teacher ratios. They also suggested greater specificity in regard to students transitions, the least

restrictive environment, and the eligibility criteria for learning disabilities. Lastly, participants wanted maintenance or an increase of the stipulations that involved paperwork provisions and federal funding. Overall, superintendents must recognize the importance of parents and their partnership with schools as they together face challenges of providing special education services so all students may find success.

Mental health. Another challenge facing superintendents in the twenty-first century is working with an increasing student population that suffers from trauma. There are as many as 46 million children in the United States who have experienced psychological trauma (Listenbee et al., 2012). Children exposed to traumatic experiences have been associated with negative school outcomes, which include lower cognitive functioning, lower academic performance, higher special education placement, higher retention rates, and higher absenteeism (Perfect, Turley, Carlson, Yohanna, & Saint Gilles, 2016; Porche, Costello, & Rosen-Reynoso, 2016). School leaders must acknowledge the challenge trauma presents for students and create systems to help students. Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, and Pollitt (2013) stated guidelines for trauma-informed schools are rooted in evidence for promoting school-wide mental health supports. Trauma-informed practices provide a framework for systems-changing strategies that form a foundational knowledge base for teachers to understand trauma, school cultures, and systems of student support (Cole, Eisner, Gregory, & Ristuccia, 2013). Regardless of the approaches taken to support mental health system-wide, Walkley and Cox (2013) asserted there must be a commitment by leadership in order for initiatives to be effective.

Succession Planning

Throughout this dissertation, it has been noted how superintendents depart regularly from the position to assume another position in another district, retire, or quit the field of education altogether. Often when a leader departs, many programs and initiatives disappear as well, because the structure and motivation that supported the programs resided within the administrator, instead of being embedded within the staff (Fusarelli, Fusarelli, & Riddick, 2018). As a result, succession planning in education, although not common, should not be an afterthought for superintendents and school boards. Riddick (2009) made the comparison between sports teams and school districts. Both should have strong “bench” players to fill administrator positions as the need arises so districts are not put in a position to hire a less than ideal candidate for the position.

To do this, many school districts have begun to develop leadership capacity building by designing succession planning programs to expand their internal pool of leadership candidates. Normore (2007) stated, “successful school districts provide well-structured leadership development opportunities and experiences by capitalizing in long-term investment of time, energy, attention, and resources to professional development programs” (p. 8). Grooming and preparing aspiring superintendents to take over the position once vacated allows school systems to continue initiatives and the overall direction of the district.

Conclusion

This section began by drawing attention to the amount of time students are in school throughout their adolescence. As a result, school superintendents must be prepared to provide students the best educational experience possible. To do this, superintendents must possess a variety of leadership skills and knowledge in order to lead school districts toward

success. Superintendents must understand the context of situations and which leadership style will be most effective. They must also have the knowledge of new challenges and trends that will challenge their school districts. Lastly, superintendents must begin to build leadership capacity throughout their district in order to continue progress when they inevitably leave the position.

Summary

School superintendents face countless challenges and must have the skills to lead school organizations toward success. To explore the issue of preparing superintendents to handle such challenges, it is important to foster an understanding of the different areas that can affect their preparation for the position. This chapter presented a comprehensive examination of the information and knowledge pertaining to four areas that shape the curriculum or experiences of superintendents: (a) careers; (b) higher education; (c) mentoring; and (d) twenty-first century leadership. The meanings they bring to these areas are also influenced by social constructionism; “how learners engage in a conversation with [their own or other people’s] artifacts, and how these conversations boost self-directed learning, and ultimately facilitate the construction of new knowledge” (Ackermann, 2001, p. 1).

Career pathways and positions held prior to that of superintendent are significant to their preparation for the role of superintendent as well as the higher education pathways that superintendents take on their way to the position. Secondly, the varied experiences in leadership as they learn and train to become educational leaders depends on the quality of preparation programs. Third, mentoring and its use throughout history and other organizations have implications for superintendent mentoring. Clearly, mentoring has been

used by teachers and principals to enhance teaching and administration. At the highest level of administrative roles, the superintendency, mentoring allows superintendents to hone and enhance their knowledge and skills leading to success toward leading their districts. The characteristics of the mentor determines the quality of the experience, leading to both mentor and mentee benefiting from the mentoring experience.

Finally, a review of leadership styles and skills needed for superintendents to be effective in meeting the challenges they will face as twenty-first century leaders suggests that leadership styles are contextual as superintendents strive to meet the needs of an ever-changing diverse society signaled by rapidly changing demographics, globalization, and technological advances. Next, Chapter 4 presents this study's methodology. This includes information relevant to co-researchers, the research design, and how data were collected and analyzed. Chapter 4 also reviews the study's limitations, including reliability, validity, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Viewing superintendent preparedness through their perceptions, I had the opportunity to obtain a better understanding of how superintendents describe their feelings of preparedness. To obtain this understanding, research questions were developed that aligned with the purpose of the study and served to guide the study's methodology. The central question and sub-questions included: What essences of meaning do superintendents have of their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

- a. What meanings do they communicate about the role of professional experiences in their preparation for superintendent?
- b. In what ways do they describe the role of higher education programs in their preparation for superintendent?
- c. How do they experience the role of mentoring in their preparation for superintendent?

This chapter presents, in detail, information on qualitative research and the traditions used in this study, including the role of the researcher. The design of the study is outlined, including information on co-researchers and sampling, the data sources, and the data analysis that was used. Additionally, included are the study's limitations, as well as discussions of the reliability, validity, and ethical considerations. The next section presents information on the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach to this study.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Considering a research design to answer the research questions led me to contemplate conducting qualitative or quantitative research. Patton (2015) stated, "The

approach here is pragmatic. Some questions lend themselves to numerical answers, and some don't" (p. 22). Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) mentioned the focus on qualitative research tends to be on the *quality* of a particular activity, rather than on how often it occurs or how it might be evaluated, which is typically the focus of quantitative research.

Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013) remarked, "there are about as many definitions of qualitative research as there are books on the subject" (p. 2). The authors are not wrong in their statement, as a wide variety of definitions are stated by different authors and researchers. Nevertheless, almost all definitions follow common themes and include similar elements. Qualitative research involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, largely narrative and visual in nature, to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Merriam (2009) stated, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13).

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) listed common features of what occurs in most qualitative inquiry. The authors stated:

- Qualitative research is conducted through intense and/or prolonged contact with participants in a naturalistic setting to investigate the everyday and/or exceptional lives of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations.
- Relatively little standardized instrumentation is used. The researcher himself or herself is essentially the main instrument in the study.
- Reading through these empirical data (i.e., data), the researcher may construct certain themes and patterns that can be reviewed with participants. (p. 9)

Grbich (2013) believed qualitative research has certain underpinning ideology or belief systems. These beliefs include: (a) subjectivity, views by the participant and the researcher are respected and data are constructed by both); (b) validity, getting to the truth of the matter); (c) reliability, elements of trustworthiness and dependability; (d) power lies predominantly with the researched; (e) a holistic view is essential; and (f) every study conducted is time and context bound.

Qualitative research is widely encompassing and contains a variety of different features that each author or researcher believes are important. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) stated, “Qualitative research may be conducted in dozens of ways, many with long traditions behind them” (p. 8). Qualitative traditions can contribute important research findings that can especially assist novice researchers to better understand educational phenomena. As a result, most educational researchers would agree educational problems are best investigated using whatever method or methods are most appropriate for the research situation (McMillan, 2012). Through investigating a variety of qualitative methods and approaches, it was determined phenomenology was the best qualitative approach to answer the study’s research questions.

Phenomenology

In general, many of the ideas within the phenomenological field are imbedded within qualitative inquiry. In a real sense, qualitative research is phenomenological in nature in that the researcher attempts to understand individuals’ lived experiences and the behavioral, emotive, and social meanings that the experiences portray (Guest et al., 2013). The qualitative approach of phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl and is concerned with attending to the ways things appear to individuals in experiences. By the use

of eidetic (essence) reduction, phenomenologists look at specific lived experiences or the essential components of a phenomenon and what makes that experience unique or distinguishable from other experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The key in such research is the person's *perceptions* of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event itself (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The qualitative tradition of phenomenology was used as a methodological framework for the study.

Husserl (2014) described the aim of phenomenology as capturing the experience or essence, without the researcher trying to interpret, explain, or theorize what is taking place. This is echoed by Creswell and Poth (2018) who stated, "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). Grbich (2013) further clarified the definition: "phenomenology is an approach that attempts to understand the hidden meanings and the essence of an experience together with how participants make sense of these" (p. 92). Mertler (2016) offered another definition more focused on one approach of collecting data in the study: "qualitative research engages the researcher in a process of individual interviews in an attempt to fully understand a specific phenomenon" (p. 360). Throughout all these definitions, the common thread is the sense of experience; specifically "lived experiences."

These "lived experiences," which are regularly mentioned, are just another way of saying ordinary life experiences that occur every day. These everyday occurrences are meaningful and at the same time superficial, until individuals are asked to reflect back on the experience and try to recover the experience and reflect on it. Van Manen (2017) stated:

The challenge of phenomenology is to recover the lived meanings of this moment without objectifying these faded meanings and without turning the lived meanings into positivistic themes, sanitized concepts, objectified descriptions, or abstract

theories. Such is the method of phenomenology in its original or authentic sense as found in the writings of leading phenomenologists. (p. 812)

A phenomenological study can engage the reader with insights into the perplexity of life of the research participants and goes well beyond introspective reflection. Van Manen (2006) classified phenomenology into four distinct orientations: Transcendental, Existential, Hermeneutical and Linguistical, each with a specific perspective and approach. Investigating each orientation, transcendental phenomenology was the best orientation for the study: to understand the essence of the meaning of preparation for the position of superintendent in Midwestern school districts, guided by the research questions.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology is described as interpretative and explores the way knowledge comes into being based on insights rather than objective characteristics to constitute meaning of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) asserted transcendental phenomenology occurs when research “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experiences and provides a systematic and disciplines methodology for derivation of knowledge” (p. 45). This path of transcendental phenomenology leads to knowledge in the absolute sense.

To facilitate this derivation of knowledge, one must go through the steps of Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation. These steps are used specifically for data analysis, discussed in more detail later in this chapter. They are elements of a natural process through which awareness, understanding, and knowledge are derived to obtain the essence of the meaning of the phenomenon. Epoche is the act of refraining from judgment and staying away from the regular way of perceiving things that

happen. It is a fresh take or a new way of looking at the phenomenon in an open sense.

Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction is the process of looking at each experience in its singularity. Each experience is perceived in its totality through a description of the “variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). The final step is Imaginative Variation, which aims to grasp the structural essence of the experience. The function of the Imaginative Variation is to arrive at a “structural differentiation among the infinite multiplicities of actual and possible cognitions, that relate to the object in question” (Husserl, 1977, p. 63, cited in Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) summarized transcendental phenomenology as:

A scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness. Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for phenomenological reflection. The very appearance of something makes it a phenomenon. The challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus designing the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience. (p. 49)

Transcendental phenomenology was used in this study because it constructs evidence from individuals’ own accounts of their experiences of preparation for the position of superintendent.

This section summarized and reviewed the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach for this study rather than a quantitative approach or mixed methods. Highlighted was the qualitative approach of phenomenology and the aim to capture the experience or essence of the phenomenon of the inquiry, without the researcher trying to interpret, explain, or theorize what is taking place. Lastly, this section focused on the orientation of transcendental phenomenology, which provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for the source of knowledge. This leads to knowledge in the absolute sense. The next section

explores the role of the researcher and the importance of reflecting on experiences throughout the study.

The Role of the Researcher

Throughout this study, the role of researcher was to be the instrument that collected and interpreted the data. This “researcher-as-instrument” is acknowledged by Guba and Lincoln (1981) and Merriam (2002) as the primary instrument in qualitative interview studies. The researcher conducting qualitative research is allowed access to the thoughts and feelings of the co-researchers and develops an understanding of the meanings superintendents ascribe to their experiences. As the primary instrument for making sense of the phenomenon in this study, I interpreted the data that was constructed. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) described this interpretive role by explaining, “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3).

While conducting research, the researcher needs to constantly reflect before and during the research process in order to provide context and understanding for the reader.

When being reflexive, researchers should not try to simply ignore or avoid their own biases (as this would likely be impossible); instead, reflexivity requires researchers to reflect upon and clearly articulate their position and subjectivities (world view, perspectives, biases), so that readers can better understand the filters through which questions were asked, data were gathered and analyzed, and findings were reported. (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226)

These unique characteristics the researcher possess have the potential to influence the collection and interpretation of the data. Creswell (2003) stated all writing done by authors are “positioned within the author’s own life experiences and worldviews” (p. 215). As a researcher, biases and characteristics play a role in the research process and as such, they are

analyzed in the concluding section. Recognizing these factors in myself and co-researchers allowed for continual, deep self-reflection to avoid obstructing or altering the research throughout the study. Hence, reflexivity is an important source for self-reflection.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is understood as both a concept and a continuous process of reflection by researchers (Dowling, 2006; Parahoo, 2006). Aligned with social constructionism, reflexivity is about the recognition that as researchers, we are part of the social world that we study (Ackerly & True, 2010). The similarities between reflection and reflexivity are evident, but Finlay (2002) argued that reflection sits at one end of the continuum as reflexivity sits at the other. This reflexivity is a personal self-awareness and an awareness of the relationship between the researcher and the research environment. Reflexivity suggests the activity of self-inspection (Colbourne & Sque, 2004) or self-reflection (Carolan, 2003). Through reflexivity, researchers acknowledge the changes brought about in themselves as a result of the research process and how these changes have affected the research process.

Jootun, McGhee, and Marland (2009) stated that the key to reflexivity is “to make the relationship and influence between the researcher and the participants explicit” (p. 45). Hesse-Biber (2007) expanded on the relationship factors further by recognizing, examining, and understanding how researchers’ “social background, location, and assumptions affect their research practice” (p. 17). This relationship does not exist independently of the research process; and, at the same time, it does not completely determine the research. Practicing reflexivity and self-awareness are significant components of qualitative research and should be embedded throughout the entirety all of the research (Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010; Morse, Barrett, & Olsen, 2002). Hand (2003) echoed this idea that

reflexivity should be considered at each stage of the research project, with the researcher examining and making explicit the decisions made.

As another continuum, reflexivity can be considered a methodological stance. On one hand, reflexivity may be viewed as significant for the qualitative researcher in the data analysis phase of research, where the researcher's presence in the interpretive text is under the spotlight (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). On the other hand, it can be utilized as a primary methodological instrument for inquiry (as in autoethnography, autobiography, and narrative inquiry). Within phenomenological research, Giorgi (1983) stated to be reflective in research is "to bend back upon or to take up again what we have experienced, lived through, or acted upon pre-reflectively" (pp. 142–143). Taking up again or bending back upon oneself or upon the subject is imperative in interpretive research which entails multiple examinations of the data beyond the explicit or unreflectively taken for face value.

However, across qualitative studies, that second look may focus on participants' retrospective accounts, the context surrounding those accounts, the researcher's methodological assumptions, or the researcher's personal attitudes and expectations (Walsh, 2003). This characterization of phenomenological reflection prefigures the term reflexivity. The concerns for the researchers' personal and professional experiences and pre-reflective experiences related to the research are referred to as bracketing, a technique of transcendental phenomenological analysis. Indeed, long before it was discussed as a methodological stance, the term reflexivity was used to describe a central feature of consciousness (Walsh, 2003). Expanding on this feature of consciousness is contextual reflexivity.

Reflexivity, like phenomenology, might best be characterized as an attitude rather than a set of procedures. Likewise, Dowling (2006) asserted that reflexivity in the research process can take on several forms in which the researcher reflects on various theoretical assumptions and perspectives. This contextual reflexivity is concerned with situating a study in its cultural and historical milieu that could include the context in which the particular phenomenon emerges during the study and also the background of the study. Contextual reflexivity recognizes research as being a historical situated activity. If the reflexive attitude entails acceptance of the inevitable historicity of knowledge and experience, then specific reflexive practices can reveal where and how attitudes are manifested (Walsh, 2003). In this study, attitudes may be reflected in the areas that shape the role: higher education experiences, professional experiences, mentoring, and twenty-first century leadership.

Reflexivity and the Superintendent's Role

Utilizing a contextual reflexivity lens or filter was appropriate for this study of superintendent experiences as I worked to self-inspect awareness of my own cultural and historical milieu. Likewise, throughout the research process, I had the opportunity to reflect on co-researchers' histories and how those experiences have shaped their current knowledge and experiences. Ackerly and True (2010) contended that researchers have to take seriously this commitment to reflexivity. I was committed to the process of reflexivity to better understand my own perceptions and those of the co-researchers as I interacted with them to bring light to the lived experiences that have shaped their roles as superintendents.

Higher education experiences. There is a critical need for schools to have leaders who are prepared to do everything necessary to improve their schools and their school districts. The current literature expresses competing views about the successfulness of

university preparation programs and their ability to prepare school leaders, at all levels, to effectively implement change in school buildings. School leadership programs must encourage administrators and superintendents to be reflexive subjects with an ethical consciousness about cultural differences that lead to an awareness of how they are positioned in relation to “the other” and what it means to be “the other.” Young (1990) asserted that “otherness” emanates from the experience of ways “the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the other” (p. 59). Robinson (2006) elaborated on “the other” by drawing attention to how leadership development rarely explores gender and race positions of school leaders in relation to marginalized groups. Education leaders typically belong to the dominate group that is masculine and White, and as such, tend to position differences (e.g., race, class, gender, and disability) as an issue for and of “the other.” Blackmore (2010b) stated that leaders of color are often required to justify their presence in the position and are expected to represent “the other.” I contend that women in the role of superintendent often face similar dilemmas.

While diversity has increased in the American education system, preparatory programs to prepare leaders must focus on a better understanding the other in order to help them and to better understand the self. Understanding of self leads to better understanding of how discrimination works, as a leader is often positioned in a dominant/subordinate social relationship. Trifonas (2003) suggested that critical to this reflexivity and ethical consciousness is emotion, because learning about oneself in relation to others involves levels of discomfort against norms of dominance. This pedagogical discourse of difference and discomfort in professional learning promises a more progressive agenda. Developing this

self-awareness capacity through leadership or preparatory programs at the university level also allows school leaders to better understand their students' historical and cultural milieu that shape their reactions to schooling. Reflecting on their practices and the practices of others can aid to bridge the differences and develop cross-cultural relationships.

Zembylas (2010) conducted an ethnographic case study to examine the emotional aspects of leadership for social justice and the implications for the leadership preparation program. The researcher followed an elementary school principal who was struggling to transform the culture of the school that had a number of students with a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Findings from the study highlighted the practices for social justice, the ambivalent emotions of social justice leadership, and strategies for coping with the dimensions of social justice leadership. A common theme throughout the study highlighted the importance of active reflection on emotional experiences. The study participant stated that reflection included "exploring the impact of your feelings on the people around you" and "keep[ing] things in perspective, keep[ing] in mind what we are fighting for." What he got out of this reflection, as he stated, was an enriched perspective about the impact of social justice work on life at the school and the community level. This reflection is echoed by Beatty (2008), who stated that school leaders' handling of the emotions in their own reflective practices and in their relationships with parents, students, and faculty shape and reflect the climate and culture of their schools. The study's findings have implications for higher education preparatory programs, highlighting the importance of including reflexive practices within the experiences of aspiring administrators.

Professional experiences. As superintendents progress through their career paths to obtain their position, they experience a variety of situations as teachers, building leaders,

central office employees (in larger districts), and then, finally, as superintendents.

Professional experiences in each position allow a myriad of reflexive opportunities to help shape future experiences and decisions. As aspiring superintendents progress and shift through different careers that provide different professional experiences, they must constantly engage reflexively within their new environments. Reflexivity places importance on conceptualizing the objective interdependence of careers in terms of unfolding processes of exploratory participating, enacting, constructing, and reflexive questioning (Blackmore, 2010a). During this process, learning emerges from their career experiences due to the shifting landscapes, ongoing exploration, biographical reflexivity, and systemic reflexivity.

Tam and Marshall (2011) stated that biographical reflexivity involves reappraising an earlier career with an attempt to bring latent values into expression and enactment. The researchers further described systemic reflexivity as being used to identify the shifting landscape (such as when one gets a new job), when one tries to identify their contribution to the change, and when one adopts new associate position practices. Systemic reflexivity is also characterized by individuals questioning the effectiveness of adopted approaches, considering the wider impact of identifying gaps, and observing inconsistencies or limitations of the paradigms from which one operates.

In a study of 32 individuals, Tam and Marshall (2011) sought to elicit responses from people who held responsible careers that have an impact on societal challenges (e.g., environmental sustainability, and social justice). Utilizing interviews and conversations, the researchers took a grounded theory approach to analyze the data. The model created by the researchers helped to explain the ongoing refinement of strategies by which leaders, change agents, and entrepreneurs engage to bring about social and sustainable innovation. They

proposed that the intensity of individuals' and groups' systemic reflexivity would determine whether such innovation becomes quickly normalized within the status quo or contributes to more radical change across institutional fields. The model also offered a fine-grained understanding of the ongoing practices and learning dynamics through which people enact careers in pluralistic and contested emerging organizational fields. It suggested that career learning unfolds through an ongoing process of exploration, improvisational enactment, and sense making (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Weick, 1996) and that such learning can lay the foundations for profound identity transformation (Ibarra, 2003).

Mentor experiences. Mentor programs through different educational levels rely on underlying theories of adult learning and the roles the curriculum asks the mentor to assume. This curriculum could draw on the social relationships and relational dynamics previously discussed. Another element of the mentor program may be shaped by theories of reflective practices in which the mentors reflect on their own mentoring practices and foster reflection in their mentees (Gaston, Davis, & Wilson, 2001). Hansman (2016) drew attention to the discourse and reflexive experiences that occur when mentors and mentees examine past, current, and possible future experiences. By reflecting on work situations and experiences with their mentors, those being mentored can be helped to see things from another person's point of view. This furthers the learning within the practice context and allows each to "unpack" the experiences that fosters psychosocial support as well as career learning and development.

Athanases et al. (2008) conducted four case studies of mentors for new teachers who had assumed leadership roles. The researchers analyzed the studies case by case to determine how these mentor leaders designed the mentor curriculum for the new teachers.

Specifically looking at case two in the study, which consisted of 75 new teachers and 15 mentors, the mentor leader designed the curriculum around processing, reflection, and role-playing. The participants reflected on personal experiences that led to discovering their identity and the impact mentoring and/or other experiences had on their development as leaders. Reflection was an important sub theme that emerged in the cross-case analysis under the theme of the *value of using inquiry*.

Twenty-first century leadership experiences. As superintendents are the leaders of the school system precipitating change in order to meet the goals and objectives of schools, they must take reflexive actions to promote new curricular and instructional changes to meet the needs of a more global and diverse society with constant technological changes. Superintendents are the head of the district but are in most cases, surrounded by a work team to accomplish the mission, vision, and goals of the district. In promoting the work to reach these goals, reflexivity has a critical role both at the individual and group levels (Boud, Cressery, & Docherty, 2006). Earlier studies have found that team reflexivity is positively associated with new product success (Dayan & Basarir, 2010), team effectiveness (Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2006), team innovation (Somech, 2006) and team functioning (van Ginkel, Tindale, & van Knippenberg, 2009). Focusing on individual reflexivity, West (2000) found that the aggregated reflexivity of individuals may contribute to the team's overall reflexivity. The team's reflexivity was defined as "the extent to which group members overtly reflect on and communicate about the group's objectives, strategies, and processes and adapt these to current or anticipated circumstances" (West & Anderson, 1996, p. 559).

Although no empirical studies of superintendent teams utilizing reflexivity were located, Hoegle and Parboteeah (2006) presented a large study of 145 development teams.

The researchers hypothesized about positive influences of team reflexivity on effectiveness and efficiencies. Through the analysis, the researchers found a positive relation to team effectiveness and team efficiency. They concluded that a reflexive team is more likely to question and tackle challenges which were produced by the ever-changing projects present. I believe this idea of being able to continuously tackle new challenges and goals can be directly related to the education field and how administrative teams work on new innovative initiatives throughout the year. For personal development, the researchers also proposed that social skills and project management skills were two important antecedents of team reflexivity.

Conclusion

The previous sections highlighted how reflexivity provided the researcher with a personal self-awareness and an awareness of the relationship between themselves and their research environment. This awareness should also be present as higher education programs teach aspiring educational leaders to be reflexive with an ethical consciousness about cultural difference and their overall positioning in relation to others. Superintendents also have the opportunity to be reflexive in the many opportunities presented to them as they progress through a variety of career positions. Many mentoring programs provide reflective practices for superintendents so they can view their positions from another person's point of view as well as their own. Lastly, as superintendents work with other members of the education community to overcome the challenges and issues of the twenty-first century, individual and group reflexive practices can have positive impacts on team effectiveness (Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2006), team innovation (Somech, 2006) and team functioning (van Ginkel, Tindale, & van Knippenberg, 2009). The following section explicitly describes the

design of the study, including the justification for selecting and use of the data sources, the data management plan, and the data analysis steps.

Design of the Study

For this transcendental phenomenological study on superintendent preparedness, co-researchers were selected from Midwestern school districts. Patton (2015) noted that participants, as co-researchers, are viewed as joint contributors and investigators to the findings of a research project. An invitational email (see Appendix A) was sent to elicit participation in the study to superintendents in rural, suburban, and urban school districts. A follow-up email or in some cases, a follow-up phone call was also made to further elicit participation. Superintendents needed to meet a specific or defining criterion, which was that they hold a doctoral degree. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013) defined criterion as “picking all cases that meet some predetermined criterion and often used in quality assurance processes” (p. 50).

After invitational emails were sent to elicit participation to a variety of superintendents in a variety of settings, a total of eight participants or co-researchers agreed to participate in the study. This sample size was determined to be appropriate and followed Padgett’s (2008) four rules of thumb when selecting co-researchers. These rules included:

- The smaller the sample size, the more intense and deeper are the data being collected.
- Larger samples are needed for heterogeneity, smaller sizes for homogeneity.
- Avoid sacrificing depth for breadth.
- Large numbers are preferred, as long as rule 3 is honored. (p. 56)

Data Sources

To understand the essences of superintendent experiences, I relied on phenomenology as a major design element of the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined phenomenology as “describing the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 75). Moustakas (1994) defined the path of transcendental phenomenology as “leading to knowledge in the absolute sense” (p. 40). Along this path, knowledge emerges to “a person who is open to see what it is, just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms” (p. 41). In order to collect this knowledge, my main data came from interviews while observations and document analysis allowed me to crystallize findings. Crystallization involves the use of multiple forms of data, across multiple genres or presentation styles to increase the number of viewpoints with which the phenomenon and participants may be analyzed (Ellingson, 2009, 2014). The following subsections provide a brief overview of the major data source of interviews in qualitative inquiry, specifically phenomenological interviewing, and how they were collected with subsequent data sources of observations and documents in the study.

Interviews. Interviews were the primary source of data for this study. “Interviewing is the most frequently used data collection technique in qualitative research” (Merriam, 2015, p. 130). deMarrais (2004) defined an interview as “a process in which a researcher and participants engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 54). Patton further elaborated on the definition of interviewing by providing the purpose as “We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe and to understand what we’ve observed” (2015, p. 426).

As with any qualitative research being conducted, it is important to ensure that the researcher conducting the study bears the burden of demonstrating the methods of data collection and analysis involve rigor and skill. Patton (2015) pointed out, “Qualitative research interviewing, seemingly straightforward, easy, and universal can be done well or poorly” (p. 423). Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, and McKinney drew attention to the fact that:

Many authors have taken up the issue of “how to do” qualitative interviewing, and most additionally affirm the importance of the researcher’s goals and purposes, the researcher’s moral commitment to seek out what is true, and the researcher’s ethical imperative to examine his or her own personal ideas, occupational ideologies, assumptions, common sense, and emotions as crucial resources for what he or she “sees” or “hears” in a particular research interview or project. (2012, p. 101)

Phenomenology works to understand the essence of experiences. Phenomenological researchers create context in which participants are encouraged to reflect retrospectively on an experience they have already lived through (Van Manen, 1990) and describe this experience as much as possible to the interviewer. Patton (2015) described phenomenological interviewing as aiming to “elicit a personal description of a *lived experience* so as to describe a phenomenon as much as possible in concrete and lived-through terms” (p. 432). This is echoed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) who described the purpose of phenomenological interviews as an “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world” (p. 3). Eliciting these experiences is not an easy task, as asking appropriate questions and relying on participants to discuss the meaning of their experiences requires patience and skill on the part of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Through the interview process, I interviewed co-researchers one or two times throughout the data collection phase, depending on their availability and preference. Taking Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) advice, I chose "a reasonable number of informants and spent an amount of time in each interview that made sense in terms of the work involved in transcribing it" (p. 131). Singular interviews lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, and multiple interviews lasting around 30 minutes, allowing participants to dive deeply into their experiences. After superintendent co-researchers agreed to participate, an interview question handout (see Appendix B) was sent to the superintendents for their review before their interview(s) took place. Due to the time demands of the co-researchers' position, each was offered the chance to participate in the interview face-to-face or via telephone. Telephone interviews, although used less often than face-to-face interviews (Opdenakker, 2006; Sweet, 2002), are a useful data collection tool because co-researchers may be more relaxed and open (Novick, 2008). Phone interviews also increased participation, as some superintendents called during long drives required of their position.

Each interview or interviews had distinct sections which allowed the co-researcher to focus specially on the area of professional experiences, higher education experiences, or mentor experiences. At the end of each interview, a statement was made about transcripts being sent to be reviewed or member checked. Patton (2015) stated:

On occasions, gaps or ambiguities found during analysis cry out for more data collection—so, where possible, interviewees may be re-contacted to clarify or deepen responses, or new observations are made to enrich descriptions. This is called *member checking*—verifying data, findings, and interpretations with the participants in the study especially key informants. (p. 524)

Throughout the interview process—before, during, and after—interactions between the interviewer and the co-researchers were designed to build trust. These interactions

included a brief story from my past or some connection to their school district, while also presenting the information in a relaxed context. King and Horrocks (2010) said, “Building rapport is not about ingratiating yourself with your participant. . . . Rapport is essentially about trust—enabling the participant to feel comfortable in opening up to you” (p. 48). Other procedures were also implemented to continuously build rapport: prompt return of calls or emails, answering their questions with appropriate care, and generally keep an open, friendly, and responsive tone to all interactions (Guest et al., 2013).

As noted above, each interview was held as a conversation, with the co-researcher taking the lead in describing their experiences. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stated, “the research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 123). In order to obtain a first-person description of the experience, “the researcher assumes the role of learner in that the participant is the one who has had the experience, is considered the expert on his or her experiences, and can share it with the researcher” (deMarrais, 2004, p. 57). This approach allowed my co-researchers to fully express their rich experiences.

In order to elicit responses from my co-researchers that described the essence of their experiences, I relied on an interview guide (see Appendix C). This interview guide contains topics and issues ready to discuss in an outline form which allowed me to decide the sequence and wording of the questions asked through the course of the interview. Patton (2015) pointed to the strength of having this outline because it “increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent. Logical gaps in data can be anticipated and closed” (p. 438).

Although I utilized an interview guide with topics to discuss, I ensured that I constructed my questions in an open-ended fashion. Maxwell (2013) stated, “Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your *interview questions* are what you ask people to gain that understanding” (p. 101). These questions allowed me as a researcher to gain information that usually concerns personal matters, such as my co-researchers’ lived experiences. In order to elicit the responses that I was seeking, I asked what Patton (2015) referred to as experience and behavior questions. An example of these questions is: “What’s your reaction to, how do you feel about, what do you think of...” (p. 444). Moustakas (1994) further explained the nature of phenomenological interview questions:

Although the primary researcher may in advance develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon, these are varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher [participant] shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question. (p. 114)

After each question was exhausted, I used summarizing transitions to continue the interview until its conclusion. I practiced active listening throughout the interview so I could ask follow-up questions to gain further description and clarification of meanings and emotions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

During the interviews, I also routinely provided reinforcement and feedback to my co-researchers. This means I let them know throughout the interview that they were providing me the information I was seeking while they communicated their lived experiences. This feedback varied depending on the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of my co-researchers and included reframing the question, giving thanks (“I really appreciate your willingness to tell me about...”), and positive remarks. Patton (2015) stated, “In essence, the

interviewer, through feedback, is “training” the interviewee to provide high-quality and relevant responses” (p. 467).

Observations. Human beings are constantly aware of their surroundings, watching and observing. Researchers take it a step further. In terms of collecting qualitative research, Mertler (2016) stated observations “involve *carefully* watching and *systematically* recording what you see and hear in a particular setting” (p. 200). Creswell and Poth (2018) believed “Observing is one of the key tools for collecting data in qualitative research” (p. 166). Observations, unlike interviews and surveys, provide researchers a chance to learn about certain things co-researchers are sometimes unwilling to talk about or share. They “provide a direct and powerful way of learning about people’s behavior and the context in which this [behavior] occurs” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 103).

DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) believed that observations provide several advantages to the researcher. Observations enhance the quality of data obtained, enhance the quality of interpretation of data (observations serve both as a collection and analytic tool), and encourages the new formation of researcher questions. The process of observational research can involve three levels of specificity that increase by each level. Angrosino (2005) described these steps as first starting with a descriptive observation collecting large amounts of data, then narrowing down to a focused observation in which the researcher looks at the material that is pertinent, and finally to a selective observation, which focuses even further.

Each superintendent co-researcher in the study was observed on one or two occasions for no more than two hours total. Superintendents were observed during a scheduled board of education meeting, which all school districts hold regularly. These meetings were generally held at the central office location or in a specific board room. As

the observer, I worked to ensure my co-researcher was present by reading the state-mandated pre-published agenda of the school district. Each observation provided an insight on the behaviors of the superintendent in the context of a public setting.

An observational protocol was used directly after the observation had taken place (see Appendix D). This protocol aided in identifying which elements to observe that addressed my research questions. By choosing a representative set of activities and actions, I was able to focus my observations to address certain features. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) stated, “observation is an iterative process, so a list of the events and situations that one will observe will change over time” (p. 84). In order to maintain my covert status, I did not record or take notes during the observation. After the observation was completed, I left the setting and recorded information on a blank protocol sheet in my vehicle. This allowed me a prescribed time to collect and record my thoughts. The creation of a transcript from the observation protocol within 48 hours of the observation allowed for a clear and accurate record of the event. My observations, observation protocol guides, and rich descriptions of the events observed provided a quality observation. Patton (2015) said, “You can judge the quality of observational reports by the extent to which the observation takes you into the situation described and deepens your understanding” (p. 332).

Documents. Qualitative researchers can use a wide variety of texts for research, although by far the most common to be used is that of written documents (O’Leary, 2014). Often viewed as unobtrusive, documents are standardized public artifacts and records that can occur in forms such as: notes, case reports, contracts, drafts, death certificates, remarks, diaries, statistics, annual reports, certificates, judgments, letters, and/or expert opinions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) made the distinction between documents and records with respect

to both what they represent and how they become relevant for research. They stated, “documents are produced in personal activities and require a contextualized interpretation, whereas records are set up in administrative and political contexts” (p. 277).

While this certainly points to the wide variety of documents for researchers to use, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) highlighted official documents as produced by schools, and other organizations, like groups and companies for specific kinds of consumption. Some external documents are good indicators of school systems’ strategies for increasing fiscal support, while in other cases they represent a direct expression of the values of those who administer the schools. This authenticity is reinforced by Creswell (2003), who pointed out a notable feature of documents is that the individual or group who created the document did so in their language or the language of their organization. These stable documents are “non-reactive data sources, meaning that they can be read and reviewed multiple times and remain unchanged by the researcher’s influence or research process” (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). Researchers can use this existing information and “rich source of information about main organization and programs” for analysis using a variety of approaches (Patton, 2015). These analysis approaches vary greatly depending on the qualitative approach undertaken by the researcher. Document analysis can also be used as a tool in conjunction with other data approaches.

I collected an assortment of official documents from my co-researchers in order to promote crystallization of the findings. Collection of documents began once co-researchers were identified, and documents were reviewed prior to the interviews and observations. The information constructed from collected documents helped guide and inform me during the interviews and observations. The documents that were collected included co-researchers’

vision/mission statements of their districts, certification records/length of service, and state reports on school districts' annual yearly progress for the last five years.

The purpose of selecting vision statements from surrounding districts was stimulated by my research interests of twenty-first century leaders and their experiences. I wanted to understand how educational leaders anticipate changes and trends in the twenty-first century and work with school staff to meet the goals and objective set forth. These vision statements are the driving forces behind the changes that occur in schools; superintendents, as transformative leaders, are leading that change. Northouse's (2001) simplest definition for transformational leadership is the ability to get people to want to change, improve, and be led. This model of leadership conceptualizes leadership as an organizational entity rather than the task of a single individual (Hallinger, 2003). This is done through three basic functions of serving and inspiring followers, leading the vision set forth before them, and offering intellectual stimulation to followers of the same caliber as the leader (Castanheira & Costa, 2011).

Selecting certification records allowed me to confirm co-researchers' timelines of certification attainment. A history of their work experience also helped confirm timelines. When I worked with my co-researchers during the interview phase of data collection, I asked critical questions to ensure I understood what my participants were saying. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) believed the researcher should "not take everything that is said at face value, but question critically to test the reliability and validity of what the interviewees tell" (p. 167). This checking ensured I had an accurate account of my co-researchers' experiences.

The final document was the annual state report of the school district's annual yearly progress (AYP). Utilizing this document for the past five years of the superintendent's tenure was the goal, but it was adjusted depending on the co-researcher's length of service. This document was selected because it portrayed a picture of the school district's success over the past five years of the superintendent's tenure based on a constant measure. This measure displayed the success (an increasing AYP percentage) or failure (a decreasing AYP percentage) of the school district under the direction of the superintendent.

Data Management

Patton (2015) stated, "That data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous" (p. 524). As a result, "researchers typically organize their data into digital files and create a file naming system" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 185). Taking this lead, I worked to incorporate my data management plan from the beginning of my research project with my research questions as a guide. Guest et al. (2013) asserted this will "allow you to quickly and easily answer these questions to guide both data collection and analysis" (p. 277). My data management plan involved first ensuring all data were converted electronically and labeled for easy access. All identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to co-researchers to ensure their confidentiality. All paper documents (e.g., official research documents, consent forms) were converted to electronic form, and all raw audio files were transcribed verbatim and stored on a password-protected computer. A record of events and logs was maintained so that I knew where my data were in the collection, conversion, and analysis process. Likewise, the study's data were routinely backed up and stored, since "It is not uncommon for servers to crash, electronic files to become corrupted, or documents ruined; hence, it is recommended that multiple archival mediums be used to store records"

(McLellan-Lemal, 2008, p. 179). All data will be stored and safeguarded in the office of the principal investigator for a period of seven years after collection.

Data Analysis

As previously described, I followed Moustakas's (1994) model of transcendental phenomenology through processes of epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of descriptions. To review, Creswell and Poth pointed to Moustakas's focus on one of Husserl's concepts of epoche or bracketing, which is "when investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (2017, p. 78). This difficult task allows the experience to be what it is and to come to know it as it presents itself. Epoche "gives us an original vantage point, a clearing of mind, space, and time.... requires that everything in the ordinary, everyday sense of knowledge be tabled and put out of action" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 86–87). This regular practice of epoche increased my competency in achieving the presuppositionless state (complete freedom from all presumptions) and in being open to what was constructed by my co-researchers.

Phenomenological reduction required me to perceive straightforwardly and describe in textural language what I saw as the qualities of the experience. It required me to bracket or set everything else aside. It "takes on the character of graded pre-reflection, reflection, and reduction, with concentrated work aimed at explicating the essential nature of the phenomenon" (Husserl, 1931, p. 114, cited in Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) stated, "This whole process of reducing toward what is texturally meaningful and essential in its phenomenal and experiential components depends on competent and clear reflectiveness, on an ability to attend, recognize, and describe with clarity" (p. 93). Through this attending,

recognizing, and describing, qualities were recognized and described, each one having its own value or horizontalizing. This horizontalizing resulted in horizons which could then be clustered and organized together into themes.

The task of imaginative variation was to seek possible meanings using imagination, varying frames of reference, and approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives, positions, roles, or functions. I sought to answer the question: How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what is it? I moved away from facts and measurable things I knew and found to be true toward meanings and essences. “Imaginative variation enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).

The last step was to put the textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the phenomenon as a whole. These essences were also never totally exhausted. Moustakas stated, “This fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon” (p. 100). Through this phenomenological model, a significant methodology was created to investigate human experiences and for gaining knowledge from a state of pure consciousness.

“Grounded theory and phenomenology have the most detailed, explicated procedures for data analysis, depending on the author chosen for guidance on analysis” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 207). As such, Moustakas was my guiding author through the data collection and analysis process. Due to the nature of the research, two different methods of data analysis were used. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using Moustakas’

modification of methods of analysis suggested by Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975). This “Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data” consists of four highly detailed analysis steps the researcher must follow. They are:

1. Using a phenomenological approach to obtain a full description of your own experiences of the phenomenon.
2. From the verbatim transcript of the researcher’s experience, complete the following steps:
 - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - b. Record all relevant statements.
 - c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
 - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
 - e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into *a description of the textures of the experience*. Include verbatim examples.
 - f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct *a description of the structures of your experience*.
 - g. Construct *a textural-structural description* of the meanings and essences of your experience.
3. The next step is from the verbatim transcript of the experience of *each* of the other *co-researchers*, complete the above steps, again.
4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers’ experiences, construct *a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience*, integrating all individual textural structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 112)

For the observation and document analysis, I worked to transcribe and condense the data. This refers “to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data that appear in the full corpus (body)” (Miles et al., 2013, p. 14). Patton (2015) expanded this identification and focus methods by “searching text for and counting recurring words or themes” (p. 541). At this part of data analysis, I made decisions as the researcher as to which parts to chunk and which category label best summarized the chunks.

I next assigned codes for each chunk I previously identified. Grbich (2013) stated that coding “involves the grouping and labeling of data in a process of making it more manageable both for display and to provide answers to research questions” (p. 259). Through these defined descriptive codes, I counted the frequency of appearances to identify the significance of the descriptive code. Next, I organized the descriptive codes and created interpretive codes, with definitions, to further group similar data. Lastly, these interpretive codes were further synthesized to construct themes.

The previous section reviewed the selection criteria to identify co-researchers and from whom the data would be collected. Interviewing as the primary source of data collection was emphasized, and the interview process was explicitly stated. Documents and observations were also reviewed as supporting data sources to strengthen the study and crystallize the findings. Lastly, the data analysis process and steps were reviewed so the true essence of the experience could be constructed. Throughout the entire study, as a researcher, I was aware of the study’s limitations and what lens/experiences I brought to the study. I also was aware of issues of validity and reliability, as well as the ethical considerations as I conducted research with human co-researchers.

Limitations

Qualitative research provides the reader with rich accounts of experiences, but as with all research, there are limitations that impact the validity of the research being conducted. Maxwell (2013) described validity in a straightforward and commonsense way as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 122). Researcher bias and the effect of the researcher on the study (reactivity) frequently are often identified as impacting the validity of qualitative research.

The subjectivity the researcher brings to the study is referred to as bias, and bias can limit the study. The researcher's prior beliefs, theories, or how they view the world (what lens they use) are impossible to eliminate completely. Researcher bias can extend into a variety of areas such as confirmation bias (Clark, 2017), question order bias (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004), leading questions (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2007), and the halo effect (Lüttin, 2012). I recognized my confirmation bias and consistently worked to not search for, interpret, or recall information in a manner that confirmed my existing beliefs. As a researcher, I did not gather or remember information selectively to confirm my existing beliefs. I used a voice recorder during interviews to ensure I collected an accurate account of my co-researchers' experiences. I also structured my interview questions so as to not influence the co-researcher's answers in regard to question order bias and leading question bias. Neutral wording was used so previous questions did not provide information or context that affected co-researchers' responses and to not lead them to responses I might have been seeking. As a researcher, I also possessed the halo effect, which refers to my impression of a person or position within education that might influence my feelings and thoughts about my co-researchers' characters or experiences. To address this bias, I was conscious of my judgments, was adherent to a code of ethics, and gave my first impression a second chance. Identifying each bias and how I dealt with each bias was important because each affected the conduct and conclusions of the study.

Reactivity is generally known as "the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). As interviewing was a major instrument in data collection, understanding and using this influence while being part of my co-researchers' worlds was important. The power or influence of the interviewer was always

present and inescapable in the research process. As I could not escape this influence, I understood the information given by co-researchers may be contaminated by those dynamics and took steps to understand power and influence. One such step to avoid the aspects of the research process was the use of a journal after interviews to speculate on how the interaction could have been intensified or changed due to my beliefs or the co-researchers' beliefs. The journal also allowed me use reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis processes to eliminate misperceptions that might have taken place. Thus, reflexivity required me to undertake an ongoing examination of *what* I knew and *how* I knew it and communicating this understanding to the reader. I worked to “be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports” (Patton, 2015, p. 70). This stance was also used in my collection and interpretation of documents and interviews.

Validity and Reliability

A variety of views exist about validation in qualitative research. Different perspective positions exist, and the positions differ in definition, terms used to describe, and the procedures to establish validation. “Criteria such as reliability and validity may be misleading in qualitative research and therefore have been redefined by various scholars” (Klenke, Martin, & Wallace, 2016, p. 39). Drawing on Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) definition, they offered their view of validation from the perspective of using alternate terms (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) that apply more naturalistic axioms. These terms serve as “the naturalist equivalents” for internal validation, external validation, reliability and creditability. Sandberg (2005) defined reliability as the

consistency of measurement and that the “principal question of reliability concerns the procedure for achieving truthful interpretation” (p. 58). Procedures for validity include those strategies used by researchers to establish the credibility of their studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “Since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter” (p. 316).

To establish validity, the researcher must have prolonged engagement with co-researchers and crystallize the data sources. Crystallization brings together several methods to enrich findings and convey the limitations of a study. Each finding is a piece of a “meaning puzzle” that is never completed, and therefore the total understanding is not possible (Ellingson, 2009). For transferability, thick descriptions must be presented of those being studied. Rather than seeking reliability, the researcher looks for dependability that the results will in fact change. Dependability and confirmability were established in this study through auditing the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The following are general strategies I used to address the issues of validity for internal validation, external validation, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One strategy was making use of multiple and different sources to provide corroborating evidence (Yin, 2014). This study used interviews, observations, and documents in hopes of uncovering consistency of findings across multiple types of data. Likewise, any inconsistencies across data invoked questions and reflections. These uncovered themes and perspectives from multiple sources were used in tandem to explore evidence of corroboration and provide crystallization.

Crystallization allows and acknowledges the partial truths that are created in research. This process also “produces knowledge about a particular phenomenon through generating a deepened, complex interpretation” (Ellingson, 2014, p. 444). The idea was explored more in-depth and expanded on in Ellingson’s (2009) earlier work:

Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (p. 4)

This use of crystallization promoted multiple perspectives, rather than making a distinction between one or another, by instead choosing “both/and” and refusing “either/or” (Ellingson, 2014, p. 448). Crystallization provided yet another way of achieving depth through compilation of many details, enhancing “thick descriptions” of findings (Geertz, 1973).

Patton (2015) stated, “thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting. Good description takes the reader into the setting being described” (p. 533). Stake (2010) continued further by adding “a description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details” (p. 49). By providing rich and thick physical descriptions, movement descriptions, and activity descriptions, detail(s) emerged showing how situations and details were connected. This allowed the researcher to make decisions regarding the transferability of the ideas generated. After raw data were collected, I constantly reviewed the data and wrote memos to add further descriptions that helped during analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With a major data collection instrument being interviews, I expected to “require verbatim transcripts of the interviews, not just notes on what you [I] felt was

significant” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). These descriptions provided a skeletal framework for analysis that led to interpretation.

To further the research validity on the preliminary analyses (consisting of descriptions or themes), feedback from the co-researchers was sought. Member checking allowed participants to be asked “how well the ongoing data analysis represents their experiences” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 206). Co-researchers had opportunities to view accounts of their experiences and determine if something was missing that could contribute to the research. Seeking the accuracy of the accounts of experiences is considered by Lincoln and Guba to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (1985, p. 314). Maxwell (2013) stated. “this is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective on what is going on” (pp. 126–127).

Ethical Considerations

The Belmont Report (1979) established ethical principles and guidelines for conducting research with human subjects. Through this report, three major principles or general prescriptive judgments arose and are relevant to the ethics of research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for person emphasizes that each individual should be treated as an autonomous agent and that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled protection. This study fully embraced respect for person and ensured co-researchers entered the study voluntarily with sufficient information about the study. Beneficence involves respecting participants’ decisions, protecting them from harm by maximizing the possible benefits, and minimizing the possible harms. This study ensured co-researchers’ decisions were respected by allowing them to excuse

themselves from the study at any time without any negative repercussions. Co-researchers and their information were protected, using pseudonyms to minimize possible harm and allow them to feel safe to share their experiences without possible repercussions. Lastly, justice looks at the equal treatment of research participants, ensuring that burdens/benefits are equally distributed. All superintendents were treated as equally as possible; yet, the researcher also considered the unique circumstances of each person. The researcher used a prescribed protocol and script when interacting with participants before, during, and after interviews. Conclusions and findings were presented to all co-researchers, and there were no monetary benefits to this study.

The University of Missouri-Kansas City's Institutional Review Board (IRB) echoes these ethical principles and guidelines. To conduct human research, the researcher presented an exempt protocol for research, which aligned with the Belmont principles, was approved in April 2019. The approved protocol ensured the three basic principles. The first is the subjects of the study are informed about its nature; the second, that participation in the study is voluntary; and third, that the benefits of the research outweigh the risks.

The researcher also participated in an online Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program aimed to educate the researcher in the ethical conduct of human research. This training aided in the researcher's understanding of research with human subjects and ensured compliance with the regulations and procedures of the before-mentioned IRB Protocol. Having direct contact with co-researchers who contributed to the research in a substantive way, I met the requisite responsibilities to assure the safety and welfare of the co-researchers. Passing the two courses (Social/Behavioral Investigator and

Social/Behavioral Responsible Conduct of Research) allowed me to possess the qualifications and expertise to appreciate the complexities of carrying out ethical research.

While the three principles of the Belmont Report required consideration, there were also other issues that require attention as “ethical issues in qualitative research is being increasingly recognized as essential, not just for ethical reasons but as an integral aspect of the research” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 7). “Ethical validation can assist researchers in addressing process ethics or ethics in practice” (Ellis, 2016, p. 435). This took the form of informed consent, confidentiality, and steps taken during data collection.

In order to ensure ethical research, the researcher was clear, honest, and transparent about the purpose of the study. The researcher did not deceive or mislead the superintendents about the purpose, procedures, risks, and/or anticipated benefits of the study. Each co-researcher in the study verbally agreed that they understood their participation is voluntary, free of coercion, and they could withdrawal at any time during the study, which was required by the approved IRB protocol.

Co-researcher confidentiality was also respected with pseudonyms, and all reports concealed their names, locations, and any other identifying information so each was protected from harm or punitive action. Likewise, if identifying another person, possibly during an interview, that person was afforded confidentiality through the use of another pseudonym.

When conducting interviews, the researcher provided information on the research’s purpose that was simple, straightforward, transparent, and understandable to the co-researcher each time. The researcher balanced the value of a potential response to the detriment it might cause the co-researcher (Patton, 2015). While minors did not participate

in this study, information could have arisen during the data collection about a previous incident of harm involving a minor. In that instance, the researcher would have followed the professional code of ethics as a mandated reporter and would have reported all suspected maltreatment to the proper authorities.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the rationale to conduct qualitative research in the tradition of phenomenology, specifically transcendental phenomenology. The role of the researcher and reflexivity was also explored. The design of the study was explicitly detailed. This included each data source and the rationale for selection of documents, observations, and interviews. The plan was presented for how data was managed, as well as the detailed steps in how the data was analyzed. Lastly, study limitation, validity, and ethical considerations were explored. Chapter 5 presents the results of data analysis and expands on the co-researchers' perceptions attributed to the phenomenon of the essence of meanings, related to their preparedness for the superintendent role.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

School superintendents are often not adequately prepared as high-quality candidates to assume the roles and responsibilities required of the position. With the problem in mind, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the meaning of preparation for the position of superintendent in Midwestern school districts. In order to capture the essence of meaning of their experiences, the qualitative tradition of phenomenology was the mode of inquiry. Phenomenology was the most appropriate qualitative approach as it aims to capture the experience or essence of the meaning for participants, without the researcher trying to interpret, explain, or theorize what is taking place (Husserl, 2014). Further, transcendental phenomenology “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experiences and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Throughout this inquiry, the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism and curriculum theory were used, which were outlined in the introduction and further elucidated in Chapter 2.

To construct meaning and understanding of the experiences related to preparation, one overarching central question and three sub-questions guided this study. What essences of meaning do superintendents have of their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

- a. What meanings do they communicate about the role of professional experiences in their preparation for superintendent?
- b. In what ways do they describe the role of higher education programs in their preparation for superintendent?

- c. How do they experience the role of mentoring in their preparation for superintendent?

To answer the research questions, data sources were identified and included documents, observations, and semi-structured interviews. The documents that were collected included co-researchers' vision/mission statements of their districts, certification records/length of service, and state reports on their school district's annual yearly progress for the last five years. Observations of regularly scheduled board of education meetings of the seven participants also occurred for a total of nine hours and 20 minutes. While some superintendents were only observed once due to the frequency of board meetings, others were observed multiple times. Viewed as co-researchers, participants were observed interacting with others (e.g., students, staff, parents, board members) and were not expected to cover any specific topics during the observations.

Lastly, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each co-researcher. Depending on the demands of their schedule, most interviews were held one time, either face-to-face or by telephone. In some instances, due to scheduling, interviews occurred over two meetings. All face-to-face meetings occurred at co-researchers' places of occupation, and one meeting was at a coffee shop located between the researcher and co-researcher. The average length of the recorded interviews was around 47 minutes; time was spent explaining the study and making the intent clear to each participant at the beginning of each interview. Likewise, I attempted to build rapport and a relationship before utilizing the interview guide and questions. After interviews were completed, co-researchers were informed they would have the opportunity to view their transcripts and make any changes needed.

To report the findings of this study, this chapter is organized with a brief overview of each co-researcher's demographics, professional experience, and district profile information. Each co-researcher was assigned a pseudonym, assigned alphabetically based on their school district size, which was used to report the results of the study. The co-researchers were two females and five males, predominantly white: Briana, Faith, Chester, Harvey, Darren, George, and Earnest. Faith was the only person of color. Next, findings from the documents and observations are reported. I used the approach of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) to analyze interview data incorporating the Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data (Colaizzi, 1973; Keen, 1975; Stevick, 1971). I elaborate on the constructed reports of the phenomenological interviews for each co-researcher by combining textural/structural descriptions and then present the final group composite report for the group. Lastly, to answer each of the research sub-questions that guided this inquiry, document transcripts, observation transcripts, interview transcripts, and the composite group report were analyzed to provide a complete picture of the data. Multiple data supported crystallization to produce a final synthesis of the findings. Throughout the process of collecting data and through the analysis process, a reflexivity journal was used. This provided the opportunity to be reflexive and to better understand my own perceptions and those of the co-researchers as I interacted with them to bring light to the lived experiences that have shaped their roles as superintendents.

Description of Co-researchers

Over 30 superintendents in rural, suburban, and urban districts in the Midwest met the criterion of holding a doctoral degree and were invited to participate in the study via the

invitational email. In total, eight co-researchers responded and agreed to participate in the study. All eight co-researchers possessed varied and diverse backgrounds in regard to their lived experiences of preparation leading up to and during their time as superintendent. Although he agreed to participate in the study, despite multiple attempts to schedule interviews, Alek dropped out of the study due to time conflicts at the end of a busy school year. However, his documents were collected, analyzed, and used in the document report. Of the remaining seven co-researchers, six were superintendents of K-12 public schools, and the seventh was a K-12 public charter school superintendent.

The co-researchers varied in years of experience as superintendent from Briana and Chester having just completed their first year, Faith finishing her second, Harvey his third, Darren and George having completed their sixth year, and Ernest his 15th year. This led to an average years of experience of 4.9 years, which is above the national average. Collectively, the co-researchers led districts that included over 75 schools and a budget of over three-quarters of a billion dollars. Comparing co-researchers to the expansive nationwide study of superintendents conducted by Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, and Ellerson (2011), the co-researchers in the study were similar to the make-up of United States superintendent demographics (see Table 1). Likewise, co-researchers' school district populations were similar to those throughout the nation as reflected in the National Center for Education Statistics 2010 report (see Table 2). This demographic similarity and school district size is important because co-researchers participating in the study are a representative sample of superintendents nationwide. These similarities of co-researchers provide some generalizability to the study.

Table 1

Co-researchers' Demographics

	Gender		Race/Ethnicity	
	Male	Female	White (not Hispanic or Latino)	Black or African American
Briana		X	X	
Chester	X		X	
Darren	X		X	
Ernest	X		X	
Faith		X		X
George	X		X	
Harvey	X		X	
Study Average	71.4%	28.6%	85.7%	14.3%
National Average	75.9%	24.1%	94%	2%

Note. National Average statistics used from Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson (2011) Decennial Study of Superintendents.

Table 2

Co-researchers by District Enrollment

	Student Enrollment			
	1,000 – 2,499	2,500 – 4,999	5,000 – 9,999	10,000 – 24,999
Briana	X			
Chester	X			
Darren		X		
Ernest		X		
Faith			X	
George			X	
Harvey				X
Study Average	28.6%	28.6%	28.6%	14.2%
National Average	23.8%	14.6%	7.7%	4.4%

Note. National Average statistics used from the National Center for Education Statistics report (2010).

From these co-researchers, documents were collected, each was observed, and interviews were held. Each of these data sources provided rich and vast amounts of data for me to analyze. The following section describes the analysis process for both documents and observations. The meanings from the findings from each are explored.

Documents and Observations

Qualitative researchers can use a wide variety of texts for research, although by far the most common to be used is that of written documents (O’Leary, 2014). Researchers can use this existing information as a “rich source of information about many organizations and programs” (Patton, 2015, p. 376) for analysis using a variety of approaches. The official documents chosen for this study were superintendent certifications, mission/vision/values of the district, and the past five-year history of the annual yearly progress of the district. Each district was assigned a pseudonym to protect the identity of co-researchers. Along with documents collected, co-researchers were also observed.

Creswell and Poth (2018) believed, “Observing is one of the key tools for collecting data in qualitative research” (p. 166). Observations, unlike interviews and surveys, provide researchers a chance to learn about certain things participants are sometimes unwilling to talk about or share. I found through conducting this study that observations “provide[d] a direct and powerful way of learning about people’s behavior and the context in which this [behavior] occurs” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 103). Nine observations of the seven co-researchers were held for a total of nine hours and 13 minutes of observations held during regularly scheduled board of education meetings, Most were held at the school district’s central office. While each co-researcher was observed once, due to the alignment of board of education meetings (multiple districts meeting on the same day each month) and frequency of

meetings (some are held once a month and others held every other week), not all superintendents were observed two times as originally planned. Observations of co-researchers who were observed only once were of longer duration. Using the observation protocol guide, as described in Chapter 3, observation transcripts were created for each observation.

To analyze both documents and observations, the first step was data condensation. This refers “to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data that appear in the full corpus (body)” (Miles et al., 2013, p. 14). At this stage of data analysis, decisions were made as to which parts to chunk in the documents and observation transcripts, and which category labels best summarized these chunks. Next, descriptive codes were assigned for each chunk identified. Grbich (2013) stated that coding “involves the grouping and labelling of data in a process of making it more manageable both for display and to provide answers to research questions” (p. 259). Through these defined descriptive codes, frequencies of appearances were counted to identify the significance of the descriptive code. Next, descriptive codes were combined to create interpretive codes, with definitions, to further group similar data. Lastly, these interpretive codes were further synthesized to construct themes. The following are meanings gleaned from the data for documents and observations.

Meaning from the Findings of the Documents

Coding the 24 official documents, I found one major theme with two interpretive codes. The major theme *incremental improvement* was constructed of the interpretive codes’ *high standards* and *focal point*. The theme of *incremental improvement* was described as an increasing movement toward the set objective. In this new age of accountability, schools

tend to reform as learning organizations, committed to continuous improvement and supportive of experimentation, ongoing evaluation, and self-reflection (Darling-Hammond & Plank, 2015). The interpretive code of *high standards* was defined as promoting a high quality learning organization and having high levels of expected attainment. Each document analyzed showed a trend over five years of each school district and their boards of education wanting to improve annual yearly performance as measured by the state's department of education. For six of the eight documents, district schools' annual yearly performance scores and breakdowns, although fluctuating slightly, showed an overall trend towards receiving all or 100% of the possible points. Darren's school district increased their achievement from earning around 88% of possible points to 99.6% of possible points five years later. George's school district, although starting at an already high level of 96% of possible points, worked to increase their performance over the five years to a score of 98.7% of possible points. Conversely, two district documents that did not show an increase in scores, now have two brand new superintendents in charge of the district, Briana and Faith. Briana's school district began to increase five years ago from 59% of points possible to almost 70% for a few years; then falling the past two years to 63% of possible points. Over the span of five years, Faith's school district dropped drastically from around 70% of possible points down to 59% of possible points, which has slowly increase to 77% of possible points.

The interpretive code of *high standards* was also constructed from the descriptive patterns that pertained to all superintendents obtaining state certification for a licensed superintendent. This required each superintendent to obtain an appropriate degree and pass a content exam in order to be certified. All co-researchers obtained a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a doctorate in education. Briana, Chester, Darren, George, and Harvey

also earned their educational specialist degree, either when they directly enrolled for the degree or in concert with the doctorate. Each co-researcher also earned their certification after obtaining their degrees. Additionally, five of the eight co-researchers earned their teaching certification with their bachelor's degree. Chester earned his teaching certification after finishing up more coursework due to majoring in business for his undergraduate degree, George had to reactivate his certification and take several more courses to obtain certification, and Faith earned her teaching credentials after obtaining her master's degree in education. While teaching certifications came through different means, all became certified building administrators when they obtained their master's degree, accounting for Faith's second master's degree. Superintendent certification was earned through co-researchers' education specialist degrees or through their doctoral degree.

The next interpretive code of *focal point* communicates the essence of vision or mission statements that communicated district goals. These statements highlighted school districts' beliefs and the future-oriented goals. As the superintendent of schools, each co-researcher was charged with working toward the vision or mission statement of the school district. Overall, many statements highlighted and focused on students being successful and excelling in their lives after school. The focus on success was seen in Alek's school district, which stated "all students acquire knowledge and skills." Faith's school district aimed to "maximize academic success," and George's school district focused on each student being "successful." All of the districts communicated a direct focus for students after they exited the school system. This was evident in Darren's school district, whose focus was to "develop students to serve as proactive, compassionate leaders." Ernest's

school district desired to produce students who could be “productive, contributing members in society.” Harvey’s school district wanted to prepare students who are “all are life-ready.”

Overall, findings from documents highlighted school districts wanting high quality superintendents and insights related to superintendents’ goals as district leaders. These findings were used later to crystallize the findings constructed from observations and the main source of data from the study, interviews. Utilizing my reflexive journal during document collection and analysis provided an outlet to record my thinking and feelings. Throughout the process, I had the opportunity to reflect on how I reacted to certain information (e.g., school district performance, mission/vision statements) and also the opportunity to compare the experience to my own experiences as an educational leader.

Meaning from the Findings of Observations

After all observations were transcribed, I analyzed nine rich sources of information that contributed to thick description. Two themes were constructed with a total of five interpretive codes as a result of analyzing observation transcripts. The first theme from observations was *meetings as ceremonies*, which was constructed from the interpretive codes of *atmosphere* and *official*. The second theme from the observations was *superintendent as storyteller* comprised of the interpretive codes *liaison*, *calculated*, and *informed*.

The first theme, *meetings as ceremonies*, was defined as a performance constructed for a specific formal occasion. All observations of co-researchers took place at the regular board of education meetings. School boards are required by the state department of education to adhere to certain ethics, statutes, and state and federal laws (Missouri School Boards Association, 2018). As such, similar policies were developed and implemented by all

school boards observed in order to be in compliance, creating a formal ceremony. The theme of *meetings as ceremonies* was constructed from the interpretive codes *atmosphere* and *official*.

The first interpretive code, *atmosphere*, was defined as the tone or mood of the place, situation, or interaction. Throughout the observations, it was clear there was a different tone or mood depending on the event taking place and the people involved in the event. During the observations, the mood of the room changed from lighthearted and cheery during celebrations to a feeling of high tension when serious topics were discussed. This ebb and flow continued throughout each observation, and typically, the *atmosphere* was dictated by the event unfolding in the room.

Moments of happiness and cheerfulness happened in almost all observations during some time, usually when students were recognized by the board and superintendent for their accomplishments. During one of George's observations, students were called up and recognized for their performance and achievement. One such event was students winning a state championship, the first team state championship ever awarded to a school district. During this time, George, the board members, and the audience heard about the students' great work and congratulated the students on their performance. Looking around, it was easy to identify proud and happy parents and friends.

During Briana's observation, in the absence of happy parents and friends, there were joyful staff members. During the beginning of the board meeting, new leadership staff who would be taking over key positions in the charter school district were introduced and welcomed with gifts. Many comments were made by board members about the positive direction the district was taking and how pleased they were with new district hires. A last

example of *atmosphere* was when staff members were recognized during one of Harvey's observations. Staff members were recognized for their recent award and cash prize for mathematics teaching. Board members, school staff, and audience members congratulated them, and the feel of the room was electric.

Conversely, there were times during observations when the *atmosphere* took on a more serious tone. This happened during Faith's observation when it was clear the board of education was not pleased with a finance presentation conducted by one of the school district's chief financial officers. Remarks were direct, the tone serious, and board members looked disgruntled. This was also the case for Ernest's observation during an exchange between board members. While Ernest was a bystander, one board member disagreed with the proposal to spend a large sum of money in one year rather than over two years, resulting in the board member making a scene about not being good stewards of taxpayers' money.

The second interpretive code, *official*, was defined as formal duties, actions, and responsibilities. Each observation followed an agenda set by the board of education that was published beforehand as required by state policies and laws. As such, through all observations, board presidents played a crucial role in starting the meeting correctly and asking for motions throughout. During Chester's observation, there was a clear understanding of parliamentary procedure and ways of carrying motions throughout the entire board meeting. I observed instances where a single board member would be in charge of correctly wording the motion and presenting it to the board. For Chester, this responsibility was shared throughout the room by different board members.

While most board presidents moved through the agendas smoothly, with proper rules of orders and correctly worded motions, Faith's board of education vice president often did

not word motions correctly; as a result, he had to repeatedly restate statements and apologize. This could have been attributed to new board of education elections taking place in April, which appeared to have resulted in board members participating in their first ever or second board of education meeting. Overall, this situation interrupted the smoothness and flow of the formal meeting.

The second theme, *superintendent as storyteller*, was defined as a narrator of events and giver of information. Throughout all observations of the co-researchers, there were countless examples of the superintendents making and elaborating on comments, clarifying situations, giving historical information about past decisions, and fielding questions from staff and board of education members. The superintendents acted as a storyteller, giving the audience and people information they needed. Eadie (2009) brought attention to this role and the importance it plays in school board and superintendent relationships that embrace proactive leadership, genuine collaboration, honest and open communication, and unwavering trust that can contribute to team building for fostering high performing schools. The theme *superintendent as storyteller* was constructed from the three interpretive codes *liaison*, *calculated*, and *informed*.

The first interpretive code, *liaison*, was defined as superintendents connecting and bridging the relationship from the school district to the board of education. Throughout all nine observations of the co-researchers, it was clear they each served a crucial role in communicating teaching and learning goals as well as accomplishments to their boards. One such instance was during Earnest's observation, when there were presentations of leveled readers conducted by two reading teachers. A clear disconnect was present between the board's understanding of the program implementation and the content being presented by

the reading teachers. During the discussion after the presentation, the questions asked by the board were not relevant to the presentation. Acting as clarifier and conflict resolver, Ernest stopped the question and answer session and spoke to “fill in the gaps” that were needed to move forward.

A similar situation occurred during Chester’s observation. A long question and answer period after a presentation was held regarding changing the grading practices of the elementary schools in the district. The assistant superintendent who presented pertinent information about the changes could not provide answers to questioning board members. When the presenter looked to Chester, possibly for help, Chester stepped in and provided the board with the answers they were looking for. Stepping in and helping behaviors were common throughout all observations, except for George’s. Whether it was due to a belief in the capacity of the presenter’s preparation beforehand or how easy the questions presented were, George did not interject or field any clarifying questions during presentations. This was in stark contrast to other co-researchers.

The second interpretive code, *calculated*, involved understanding situations to get the desired outcomes. During the observations, superintendents displayed a certain savviness and poise to achieve desired outcomes. This was sometimes through providing rationales or explanations, bartering behaviors, bringing light to an issue and/or directing the discussion back to doing what was best for students. During Faith’s observation, there was a presentation in which the board members repeatedly asked questions of the presenter. Tensions began to rise as the board was not getting the answers they wanted. Faith waited patiently for the questions to come to a brief halt and then addressed the board. During this address, she highlighted how it was due to the decisions made by the board that the district

was in a problematic position. Faith spoke to how she had presented other methods and choices to the board, but the board of education did not accept those, and as a result, they were in the current situation. This exchange, while pointed, was calm. The presenter finished shortly thereafter because there were no more questions from the board.

During Ernest's observation, this *calculation* was present when a student was being recognized for her work over and beyond what a student should be doing for a program. The student participated in a program that promoted real world experiences and learning outside of school in which she received recognition at the state level for countless hours of extra learning. Ernest took this time to highlight how important real-life experiences are for the preparation of students for life after high school and connected his comments back to a recently passed district initiative that required funds to implement. Through his talk, he reiterated the fact that this was "exactly the direction the district is moving toward." Lastly, during Briana's observation, she continued to compare the district's success and trajectory in relation to the same time last year and to historical data. Continually tying back to recent successes strengthened the trust and relationship between the superintendent and board, allowing Briana to move forward with plans and initiatives.

The third and final interpretive code, *informed*, was perceived as having the needed knowledge and information when asked. While co-researchers communicated with people throughout the observations, there were instances in which they displayed knowledge and information others did not have. One example was during Chester's observation. He presented information about salary increases for the next school year. After the presentation, board members asked him specific questions related to comparing other neighboring districts and what they were doing in regard to current pay. Although it was not included in

the notes or the presentation, Chester was able to answer their multiple questions on the fly without hesitation.

I also observed this phenomenon of *informed* during George's first observation. During the first student recognition, he commented on the storied history of success the program had experienced since his time in the district. He recounted the history and then made a joke with the student about a quick turnaround because the national competition the student was attending was the next day. This clearly caught the student off guard when he joked about her having her bags packed ready to go to Florida, and it took her a minute to get the joke. George was clearly informed of not only the past events but also details of the upcoming student competition.

The last illustration of *informed* was during Harvey's first observation. Staff members were acknowledged for their accomplishments in the recognition section of the agenda. After brief comments Harvey made about how proud the district was of their work, each staff member also recognized the people they had brought with them to the meeting. During this time, Harvey recounted an award won by the husband of a teacher previously recognized in the past, stating that it must be an exciting year for the family. Harvey was perceived as being well-informed and prepared with information to make connections to this past accomplishment.

Overall, observations provided an opportunity for me to obtain first-hand accounts of interactions of the co-researchers with board members and the audiences served by the district. Through these interactions, themes were constructed from the data. The first theme was *meetings as ceremonies*, which was constructed from the interpretive codes of *atmosphere* and *official*. The second theme from the observations was *superintendent as*

storyteller, which was constructed from the interpretive codes *liaison*, *calculated*, and *informed*.

Utilizing my reflexive journal was especially useful when collecting observational data during analysis. The journal provided a refresher for my emotional state during the observations while analyzing data, especially if I had experienced a hard day at work or was tired. Journaling my experiences helped me recall my mood and state of mind during the observation. The journal also provided reflective opportunities, a chance to review and reflect on how I interpreted what was said during observations. Lastly, the journal revealed my thinking and interpretations from my own lived experiences at board of education meetings. The next and final data source of the study was interviews, with findings reported in the next section, following the discussion of phenomenological interviewing.

Phenomenological Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews provided the most descriptive findings of the eight co-researchers' experiences of their preparation for the position of superintendent. Interviews provided a context in which co-researchers were encouraged to reflect retrospectively on their lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) and a chance for them to describe experiences with great detail. When I mention lived experiences, including my own, Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) explained them as, "the result of any transaction between people and the world, emphasizing the subjective significance....the subjective side of culture – mediates, social and cultural situation offers possibilities and constrictions. Each event or situation has a different effect on behavior" (p. 33). Patton (2015) described phenomenological interviewing as aiming to "elicit a personal description of a lived experience so as to describe a phenomenon as much as possible in concrete and lived-

through terms” (p. 432). This is echoed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), who described the role of phenomenological interviews as an “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world” (p. 3).

As noted earlier, interviews were conducted with co-researchers face-to-face at a place of their choice or by phone using an interview guide. The length of co-researchers’ interviews averaged around 47 minutes, with the shortest being 36 minutes and the longest being one hour and three minutes. After each audio-recorded interview was transcribed, co-researchers had an opportunity to review and edit their interviews as needed. The final transcript data were analyzed using Moustakas’ modification of methods of analysis suggested by Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975). This “Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data” consisted of four highly detailed analysis steps, which were outlined in Chapter 4. From the verbatim transcribed transcripts, the process of clustering invariant meaning units or themes from the interviews took place. From these, the individual textural descriptions reported the *what* of the phenomenon. Next, individual structural descriptions were created that reported the *how* of the phenomenon. The next section presents each co-researcher’s individual combined textural/structural description, followed up by the final group composite report. Each co-researcher is listed in alphabetical order, established by the number of students attending the district.

Individual Textural/Structural Description

The set of descriptions constitute a combination of the textural (*what*) and the structural (*how*) to create an overall construction of each co-researcher’s experiences of their

feelings of preparedness. Each provided a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience of preparation for the seven superintendents, the co-researchers.

Briana. Briana started on her journey of preparation for the position of superintendency many years ago, unbeknownst to her, after 34 years in K-12 public education and another three in a K-12 charter school district. She began this journey at a nearby four-year university because “it was closer to home,” and she focused her studies on elementary education, wanting to become a teacher. She graduated early, having the internal drive she possessed as a child, and obtained a position in a small school district for one semester. She then moved and began to teach in the district where she lived, ending up working there for nine years.

While teaching fifth and second grade, Briana went back to graduate to school because:

You know when you’re in education, if you’re going to make any money, you pretty much, at least in those days, at that time, you had to go into administration. You know. Now you know, honestly, there are some teachers that once you have worked 25 years in the system, you’re making pretty close to what a beginning assistant principal makes.

She moved onto to get her master’s from the same school she attended for undergraduate school because of familiarity and its convenience. At that time, while she was teaching, she did not have a mentor but instead relied on other teachers to “just kind of figure it out together.” She sought out others, wanting to get better, and was “just getting the help on my own.” Briana did not have a strong principal in the building and when it was time in her master’s to complete a principal internship, it “was a struggle to find authentic tasks.”

Wanting to finally branch out from the safety of home, she chose to go to a different university for her specialist's degree. Going to the same institution, she said, "You know I began to say okay I am getting the same instructions, the same professors, so I am beginning to hear the same stuff so I need to, you know, travel a little bit." There she took coursework to prepare her for the superintendency and central office work. A beneficial class she recalled was one that dealt with "forecasting enrollment and that kind of thing." This course was beneficial because it taught her "planning and using data to make, you know, good prediction in terms of here, in enrollment and making long-term plans and predictions on, you know, facilities and things like that."

When she graduated with her specialist's degree, she made sure to also get additional certification to "make me more marketable." She was always working to put herself in a good position, providing for her family at home. She soon moved from classroom teaching straight into a head principal position in a nearby elementary school. During this time, she pushed herself to yet another university to obtain her doctorate in education degree. Briana recalls choosing this school because "a doctor from there is more prestigious than say, some other maybe institution." Having a degree from there would again increase her marketability and opportunities available for her. One class she recalls was focused on communication, and it was "about really learning about the importance of being able to communicate to all your targeted audience." Working on her dissertation on student achievement, Briana recalls the hard struggles as her committee chair left the university partway through her program and it "was not a good departure." This was a tough stretch of time with the demands of her job, the travel to campus, and the awkward position she was in as she tried to finish her schooling.

After graduating, she transitioned into a central office position in another nearby district, as the assistant superintendent of human resources. Briana recalls:

I applied for that district office position as the assistant superintendent of human resources, um there were two of us in the district that you know got down to final two and the thing that gave me the edge was having my doctorate.

Her first year, she had the opportunity to work collaboratively with the person whom she would replace the following year. For her new position, “I was given a really great opportunity...I felt very much supported and ready to take on that role.” She knew she was ready and could handle it. This process of support contributed to her success. She continued as the assistant superintendent of human resources for 16 years. During this time, she attended cabinet meetings and board of education meetings, where she witnessed superintendents working with boards of education and others. She recalled, “I think that was good just being able to be a part of an administrative team,” This work let her experience a variety of situations and opportunities that involved collaborating with other high district level staff. This work helped her understand other roles and system thinking, giving her “good experiences.”

While working as the assistant superintendent of human resources, Briana began to explore outside networks, mainly professional organizations, for support to continue to work and grow. Having the opportunity to meet and network at annual conferences allowed her to form relationships with other professionals in the area. Through these relationships she relied “on a regular basis to just bounce situations off them, you know, how do you handle that?” She continued along this path until she retired from education after 34 years. Over the next few years, she began her second career as a university student teacher advisor. She was helping prepare the next generation of teachers and instilling that work passion she held. She

soon realized, “I was working quite a lot and I decided to go ahead to go back to work.”

Briana chose to work in a charter school district as the assistant superintendent of human resources because it allowed her to pay into a different retirement system than before.

Again, she was providing money for her family and the safety that came with it.

She recalls when the superintendent left her new district suddenly in June, making it difficult to find a high-quality candidate in a short amount of time. Briana decided, “I had the central office experience and I had the certificate, so I say I will do it for a year to kinda hold them together.” She was not ready, but she was ready to take on the challenge. She did recall, “what I did have coursework on, was long forgotten” and her time working in a large district in human resources did not prepare her to know “much about the operations” of a district. The first year was tough. During the year, though, she developed relationships with other charter school superintendents and organizations. As she continued to understand the responsibilities and fulfill the role, she formed vital relationships to fill in the gaps in order to move the district and the students forward.

Chester. In the beginning, Chester struggled to determine his pathway through life. He stated, “I feel like I might be an outlier” due to focusing on business during his undergraduate degree with just a minor in education. With a passion for sports, he moved to Tennessee to “explore” college football coaching after graduating, which led him to finish a master’s degree in health and wellness. Eventually moving back to Missouri, he decided to get into education, returning to school in order to get his teaching certification.

Being married and working in a small district, he was “only making part time money really.” In order to provide for his family, he left education to use his original business degree. The education realm continued to call to him, and after four years, he returned to

education. “I got back in it with the intent I knew I wasn’t going to be a classroom instructor for 30 years.” He started his administration degree the same year he was a business teacher. After four years of classroom teaching, he had the opportunity to move into the seventh to twelfth grade building principal role when that principal moved into the superintendent position, “literally just a couple doors down.”

Working in such a small school, Chester took on more roles than just principal. He was the transportation director and basketball coach, too. He recalls, “It was not that glamorous” and due to working in a very small district, “you pretty much get a dose of everything.” But since the school and district were so small, “you felt isolated.” Wanting to transition to a larger district, Chester applied for head principal roles but found the door closed. He recalled through all his job searching that “the hardest part is getting your foot in the door.” He had “an HR person tell me, mainly because of the size of the district...we are probably looking for someone with a doctorate degree.” With a desire to continue to grow, Chester took on an assistant principal role instead in a much larger district and school.

Although he had a long and varied experience attending different universities, with his sights set on his future, he “decided not to go the specialist route” and enrolled in an education doctorate program. Wanting to be close to his family, he chose the local program with eight other co-workers to go through the experience together: “we were a team.” All “had an interest in central office,” and the instructor, who was a practitioner in education, led everyone on the journey to understand what goes on at the central office level and what leadership there was really like. Chester also recalled the finance class:

Really [hard to] make a solid tie until you’re sitting behind the numbers, working on the finance side, they just give you a scooch. I think that one is one you don’t get enough experience on; I think the finance is really important.

During that time, if he had real numbers that had real value in front of him, “the class would have been more worthwhile.” Upon graduating, Chester moved up to the central office level in the district, becoming the director of facilities.

He was again tasked with wearing many hats; now being in charge of food services, transportation, and custodial services. He also had to find his place within the organization. As a principal, he was in charge of making the school successful, and in his new role, he was supporting principals to help them make their schools successful. His assistant superintendent helped him through this role by being “honest with me about some growth opportunities and personality [issues].” This role was beneficial for Chester over his six years in the position as he worked “his way up,” because it gave him valuable experience managing the operations side of the district—something he feels was “a little different realm” compared with other superintendents who “came up through the instruction side.” Knowing he wanted to be a superintendent, he again found the door closed to him. He “was having a hard time getting interviews.” He again had to make a move to and took a job at a neighboring district as the executive director of operations. This allowed Chester to work at the “cabinet level” for four years, working with other district leaders, the superintendent, and the board of education.

During this time traveling his non-traditional pathway, he “learned so many things” along the way. At his new level, he found more layers to work with and “bounce things off of.” During this time, he was also exposed to a different style of leadership than his superintendent possessed. He spent many times watching him because:

He had a different demeanor about him that a lot of people thought that he was kind of, like almost conceited but really, he was just an introverted person that was quiet

until he needed to say something. So just by watching him helped. I learned more from him in a year than in any class.

As Chester's network grew, he found more and more people he was able to connect with and ask questions. The connections he made throughout his career provided various people in other districts who had "similar roles" to whom he could reach out. He recalled that it is more helpful and easier to "have a conversation with people you're comfortable with than just professional acquaintances."

Wanting to continue along his journey, he came across a school district not far away "doing their own search for a deputy superintendent to come in for one year and then be a candidate for when the superintendent retired." For Chester, "personally, I couldn't have stepped into a better situation." Working alongside a veteran, successful superintendent with "a strong background in finance" was a unique opportunity that set him up for success. The district was also moving toward developing a facility improvement project, which was an area of strength for Chester, as he "had a strong history" in facilities.

Not even halfway through that year as deputy superintendent, he found himself running board meetings and the superintendent helped, he said, "get me off the ground and running," providing him experience for the role. The superintendent also provided that much needed safety net. From these experiences, he was presented with the superintendent job the following year. Chester learned that "the biggest thing when you're getting into this role, it's kind of cliché but it's also not—it's to be transparent in your decision making." Being "transparent as possible in your decision making" and "working for a positive superintendent board president relationship" has allowed Chester to believe he finished his first year successfully.

Darren. At the beginning of college, Darren said he was “struggling to find myself and what direction I needed to take in life. I was clueless.” But he soon found that direction at the local water park, interacting with young children. During this work experience, he really “tapped into the love I had for kids” and chose to pursue education as a career. After finishing his undergraduate degree, Darren started working at the local Catholic elementary school, working there for his first three years in education. Having his bachelor’s degree in education, he “felt like I was supposed to know everything because I had a degree and I was supposed to be able to do everything, so that was a big, big mistake on my part.” In those first few years of teaching, Darren “didn’t use a mentor at all, to my fault,” because he thought he could do it all. Finding out that was not the case and wanting to grow and learn, he decided to go back to school to continue his education.

He chose to attend his alma mater to complete his master’s degree because it was a “reputable institution” and a “good value.” The nearness of the school and camaraderie provided a “fraternal feeling” that made everyone feel like they belonged. He was not quite sure which direction to take. “I had it narrowed down to counseling to be a guidance counselor or administration. I’ve always been attentive to the social emotional side of things.” Talking with his wife, another teacher, he “decided for all the wrong reasons to go into administration. And that was because of the money.” With a toddler and an infant at home, it was the choice he needed to make.

Partway through his master’s degree, he again made another financial decision and moved to public education to continue to provide for his growing family. He worked two years as a public school elementary teacher and graduated with his master’s degree. When he completed the program, he was offered a principalship of a small Catholic school near

where he grew up but instead chose to “immediately move into an assistant principal role” closer to where he was living with his family. In this position, he felt isolated at the building level, and he did not have central office support. “I mean I maybe saw one of the two assistant superintendents in my building once and that was because there was a heating issue, in all my time there.”

Wanting to continue to grow and learn, he decided to continue his education by starting his educational specialist program at again, his alma mater. The “very traditional, face-to-face meetings with a lot of interaction with the professors” allowed him to grow within a “tight knit group of people.” Learning from practitioners allowed Darren to understand real world situations and learn from people who were in the field, “doing the work.” He was lacking collaboration in his professional life, which is why he “kept going to school, kept getting degrees to find some type of collaboration or support.”

While in the program and only after being an assistant principal for one year, Darren “couldn’t sit still” and “was eager and ambitious” because he wanted to run his own school. He got the opportunity when he changed districts and took over a fifth-sixth grade building. He recalls that this first lead position “was a real butt kicker” because he came in full of energy and ready to make changes for the better. Although he was “full of piss and vinegar,” he ran into a veteran staff that did not necessarily want to listen to an energetic 28-year-old wanting to enact change. This was a great learning experience while he navigated “the waters” and learned through “a baptism by fire.” Reflecting back, he recalls not really understanding how to enact change and being able to lead people. “I knew nothing about it.” They were “hard lessons learned” and those “on-the-job experiences were more valuable than anything else I could have done.”

After graduating with his specialist's degree and two years of growth, Darren was presented with the opportunity to open a brand-new fifth-sixth grade building in the district. He took on the challenge to create his own building culture and start things out from the beginning. "It was quite an experience." This was a challenging period in Darren's life, and he recalls:

I would tell you the highest I have been in my career and at times the lowest I have been in my career...it was really hard work to open a school, but it was also at the end of the day, really, really rewarding. I look back on what we built there, and you know damn proud of the work that we did, we built a damn fine school.

Still though, after four years of running the school and being recognized with numerous awards, he was "getting kind of bored." "You can always go create new challenges and raise the bar here and raise the bar there," but he was looking for a different challenge and was again, getting restless. His superintendent, a strong mentor in his career at the time, noticed this and encouraged him take the next step in his career. Armed with his specialist degree, he "landed an assistant superintendent of human resources and school improvement" position in a nearby, smaller district.

During this time, at the assistant superintendent level, Darren started to experience what central office leadership had in store for him. Through the experience at the central office level, he had the ability to encounter situations beyond the building level. The superintendent in the district was "very hands off" and played a role in Darren's preparation by being absent, rather than present. This experience was again, "baptism by fire." Darren recalls going into board meetings:

Never knowing if he [the superintendent] was going to support me or just kind of measure the tide, which direction the winds blowing and the board doesn't seem to be going my direction, then suddenly I'm out on the branch all by myself.

He learned a lot through working with school boards, because there “wasn’t much help there.” After a while, he was again looking for a challenge.

Talking with his wife, he decided that it was time to look into superintendent positions around the area. As it would happen, one position was open back where Darren grew up, and he decided to apply. Even with a phenomenal interview—“I rocked it,”—the job went to an internal candidate. “It was great experience though.” The board was impressed with his skills and by promoting the assistant superintendent to head superintendent, there was now a vacancy at that position in the school district. He recalls:

So, I’m thinking you know that’s a lateral move in a district that half the size of what I’m working for now. I believe in a higher power, a presence in my life and that of my family, and my family has always been much better attuned in that higher power than I have been. She [his wife] was kind of like Darren, this is what we’re supposed to do, I mean you need, you need to look into this, you need to look into this.

Darren applied for and accepted the job, relocating his family back to where he grew up. In his new position “back home,” Darren knew he needed to continue to grow and obtain his doctorate degree. He located a distinctive program that met his needs and was “a totally different venture, totally a different ballgame.” The doctorate program allowed him to complete his coursework on the weekends, when he wanted to do the work, rather than during the weekdays. “My kids were involved at that time, because of their age, what appealed to me was having my weeknights free to help and be with them.”

Beginning the program, one of the first classes “was designed to be a weed-you-out class” and was taught by a hard instructor who wanted nothing but excellence from her students. From this class, Darren was “hit over the head a bit” and really “had to work hard and study.” Even though it was a foundational class, she was “probably the hardest teacher I have ever had and like they always say, true to form, I probably learned the most than in any

other class I had taken.” While he still “references the work of that course frequently,” he also had memorable classes regarding law with a state education lawyer, finance with a state level “guru” practitioner, and an “ethics class which was ridiculous. It was just the dumbest damn thing.”

Wrapping up the program, Darren participated in the program project, “AKA the dissertation,” which was done as a group project. He “was terrified of having to work with other people for the project” but pretty soon, the others in the group dropped out and it was left to Darren and another student. Together, they pushed through the project, and they selected a topic Darren believed was “right up my alley.” After remarks from their advisor about them asking too many questions, their work continued with little oversight and direction. At the end of their project, they presented their final product and scheduled their defense. But “two days before we are scheduled to drive down there, we get a call and he says ‘Guys, we got a big problem with this’” and even though they defended, they had to complete weeks of constant editing to finish. He said, “It was a living hell.” Darren described it as a bad experience with their advisor, “who was worthless.” Darren and his partner bonded through the ordeal and “I would consider him a brother now.”

During this challenge, Darren was also working with a strong superintendent who was very much “hands on.” He “took a strong interest in me and my career development” and through the years, “he turned out to be a pretty good mentor.” He was a great guy who would:

Give me a kick in the pants every now and again. I knew I needed somebody to take the time to sit and listen to me and point out where I need to grow but also pat me on the back for where I’m strong.

Finishing his doctoral degree and working in the district for years allowed Darren to learn to not think too far into the future, but to work at the tasks at hand. He would have been “perfectly content being assistant superintendent” because “you make plenty of money as assistant superintendent and once you make that step into the big chair, you make a little more money, but you take on a lot more responsibility.” Concentrating on the jobs at hand allowed him to constantly grow as a leader from those around him and working with other assistant superintendents throughout the area. This allowed Darren to feel ready to move into the superintendent role in the district when it opened just four years later. He “applied and gave the rest to God and uh and let it roll, that was six years ago, so I’ve been superintendent ever since.”

Ernest. Wanting “to be a conservation agent,” Ernest did the “grand tour of state colleges and universities” as he tried his hand at different things, trying to figure out his future. Through his tutoring and working with college students in science classes, his advisor saw his talent and encouraged him to “think about changing jobs.” After a little time, Ernest said, he “finally got my stuff straight and decided what I wanted to do first of all, and second be mature enough to be successful in college.” As a result, he decided to major in science education and minor in physical education.

After he graduated, he began teaching at his old high school and just “showed back up on his doorstep” of his old high school science teacher. He asked, “Okay, now what do I do?” Over the next nine years teaching biology, chemistry, and physics, he relied on his old teacher, who “taught me a love of science and even though I didn’t know it at the time, how to be a good teacher.” His building principal at the time, whom he knew from his days as a student at the high school, began to mentor Ernest. He was:

One of those guys who can spot talent and cultivate that talent. Doing it in a way that that will never let you get a big head, right? And again, he and I are still close, I still visit with him on a regular basis.

Through this leadership cultivation and honest feedback, he began to take on more roles within the school, “leading some school improvement initiatives,” getting experienced. Through those experiences and being recognized as someone who can impact more people for the better, things “just went from there.” He decided to return to school, but because it was before the advent of satellite campuses and online courses, Ernest had to carpool to class at a large nearby university multiple times a week. He was “unsure of whether or not I wanted to move in the direction of school administration” but decided to take classes in the evening to work on his master’s degree in school administration.

During this time, he reflected on his current role and wanted to find out what was next in his life, “what’s the next thing,” always looking for a challenge. So, after graduating, he looked for an assistant principal position and thought “Yep, I want to do this, so I took the plunge.” The plunge was significant, as Ernest’s family was uprooted and moved when he took an assistant principal position at a large high school in the state. Moving into the position, it “was an interesting dynamic” as the whole administration staff at the high school turned over. While the principal was fired, the assistant principals in the building resigned in protest, creating “a mess.” The district brought in a strong principal from a neighboring state, and he “was the stereotypically good ol’ boy for sure.” Although he had a completely different leadership style, Ernest learned a lot from him because regardless of management style, “working for kids, that’s the most important thing.” After two years as assistant principal in the building, he took over the principalship and was “in

no way ready for the position, they should have never hired me.” The job was all encompassing and demanding; he was “kinda thrown to the wolves so to speak.”

The job was “ridiculously intense.” This intensity was brought on by working in a large demanding building that was making “serious progress” meeting the needs of a diverse student population, and also because of constant leadership turnover at the district level. Almost every year in the district, a different superintendent was trying to lead the schools. Ernest learned a lot about leadership in that time, about what to do and also what not to do; “it was a great learning opportunity.” He said, “Looking back, if you could make it in that district, you could make it anywhere.” During that time, Ernest made lasting relationships with other administrators because they too were going through the same process of constantly changing leadership, and “few could understand what that’s about.”

During this trying time, he also began his doctoral program. He selected a program that had a nearby “satellite program” at a “time when online programs weren’t really around yet.” Progressing through the program, focusing on “educational policy leadership,” twice Ernest had to travel and spend a few weeks at the main campus to complete residency requirements. While “it was ridiculously hot and everybody’s families went off to the beach, we spent ten days working together collaboratively.” This experience was “intense” and “pretty incredible,” as it provided an opportunity for leaders from around the country, “school administrator practitioners,” to learn about issues in education and how to solve them to help kids. Ernest recalls from the experience, “I think the greatest takeaway from [the collaboration] was there is great people everywhere, and although problems are slightly different, in general, they are very much the same.”

Through the program, he covered issues of school finance and business operations and recalls that “unless you have actual practitioners teaching those courses, it is very difficult for a university instructor to teach what operating a school is really like.” Having that first-hand experience as an instructor is required to make the course authentic. An old superintendent once told Ernest, “school finance is the thing that superintendents pay the least attention to, but it’s the thing they should pay the most attention to because it will get them into trouble the quickest.” He completed the program and due to the demands of his current job, Ernest realized, “I couldn’t do that job forever.” He made the decision with his family, and moved from a building role directly into a superintendent role in a small rural district.

Moving directly from the high school principalship into the superintendency, Ernest relied on mentors who led him through the varied experiences at the central office level that he had missed out on coming from the building level. In his new position, he soon learned from a negative interaction with a recently incarcerated parent that he could not solely rely on his past experiences. He realized that “a really critical piece was recognizing that the growth never ends, that growth is, is a continuum and one can never stop learning.” Moving from the building level to running a district required him to learn the new components of leadership that he simply could not learn in his previous positions: “things about district operations, things about school finance, and things about board of education relations.” This growing period required him to “pick things up along the way.”

Unfortunately, the mentor assigned to him that first year, “the guy was a joke, which is typically the case.” Although he might have been a very good school leader, it was not a good fit. “They might not align with your ideology so to speak.” Instead, Ernest fell

back on his own network of advisors that he had built up over his years in education. When faced with a decision he would:

Call those advisors and with a situation of what would you do? Typically, you would get three different answers and then the solution you come up with is going to be different than all three of those answers. But those answers will help you get to the decision and that is really what you're looking for. So, choose wisely and keep advisors. Don't pick advisors that are exactly like you are. Pick ones that think differently than you do and generally, you will arrive at the best overall decisions.

After his five years in that position, he decided he wanted a new challenge and applied for an open superintendent position in a larger school district, which he won. Now serving as a superintendent in one district for a decade, which is "a very rare thing," Ernest has had the opportunity to reflect on his preparation leading up to the superintendency. He recounts, "It is all about the number of experiences you have, because experiences are opportunities to figure out how to solve problems. The more opportunities or chances to solve problems, the more likely you'll be successful down the road."

Faith. Graduating with a degree in social work, Faith began to apply for positions in her hometown and in another state where her parents had met and where other family lived. She was offered a job where she often spent summers and breaks with her extended family and cousins. She began her career working with students, as she worked with "teen mothers on welfare" and began to "tutor and mentor adolescents" in a juvenile offenders program. Through this successful work, her supervisor pushed her to apply for an accelerated program to earn her teaching credentials because there was a shortage of middle school African American teachers in a nearby city. Being accepted into the fellowship program at a university, Faith relocated and earned her master's degree and certification to teach.

Soon she began working as a middle school teacher. Her first year “was the worst.” That first year, “Oh, my goodness,” was a year of discovery of behavior issues in class and challenges to build relationships with students who were “just like nine years younger than me.” Balancing her personality and how she viewed classroom management, Faith took a journey to develop the skills needed and developed an “absolute love” for middle school students. In this position, she built “really positive relationships with children and worked with them through academics.” Over the next ten years, she developed into a master teacher who crafted a strong reputation in the building by utilizing her past as a social worker, “making home visits...schedule parent meetings...anything to build that needed relationship.”

During this ten-year span, Faith also decided to return to school to continue to grow as a professional. “I truly love to go to school.” She entered or rather “was kind of pushed or coerced into going back for my administrative certification” into her second master’s program in instructional leadership to get her director of instruction license. From the instruction in her higher education programs, Faith began to share skills with other teachers as she would “under fill” or fill in for the building administrators when they were out of the building.

While working on the program, she “carried out long-term assistant principal positions...so serving as an interim assistant principal” in the district. In this position, she was really tasked with moving from “an instructional leader to an administrative leader.” She faced the challenge of getting teachers to the place she was as a master teacher, by observing and then coaching. Faith recalls this as a challenge because “I was not an extrovert at all.” From this challenge, Faith developed and honed her skills of observation

and reflection, which helped her teachers but also served her throughout her leadership career. During this time, she was able to work with “leaders that were phenomenal and leaders who weren’t so great.” By reflecting along the way, she would put herself in situations and see “what would I do differently” and by reflecting, “For me, it wasn’t about placing blame or saying that person wasn’t good,” it was finding out “what really works for me.” Faith recalled:

Using that reflection piece along the way and observations of other people and leaders to find out what really aligns with my personality type and my leadership style, and my belief around education and children and schoolings was the most beneficial thing for me as a leader.

During this reflection period, Faith also decided it was time to go back to school to pursue her doctoral degree. She entered a unique, accelerated program at a nearby university that had a strong commitment for all participants to finish within three years. To even begin the process and the program, Faith went through an interview process in which after the one-on-one interviews, she was placed in a group interview. This group interview consisted of one prospective student asking questions to the group and then leading a conversation about the educational topic, while faculty observed from around the room. This provided opportunities for each student, all educational leaders, to engage collaboratively with each other and exchange their thoughts and perceptions about educational issues and topics. The theme of collaboration was constant throughout the program after Faith was accepted, and it was “absolutely the best experience for a schooling that I’ve gone through.” The connections Faith made in the program lasted over the years to her current position, and she can call or text anyone, from program facilitators to other students today with questions or problems and “get an answer back pretty quickly.”

During this time, Faith was able to move into a K-8 building principal position while working on her degree, which required her to meet on the weekends, “rolling through multiple courses at once.” While no specific classes stood out to her, the “dialogue and collaboration” was the greatest takeaway from her higher education experiences, as well as “the reflection piece that was intermixed throughout.” This reflection “allowed me to truly know who I was, to be a better leader, as I prepared to lead others.” Finishing the program and completing her second year as head principal, she transitioned to the central office level at a small district as a director of student services. Serving in this role for five years allowed Faith to understand the “different components of each department” and how the central office operated.

Faith also had a superintendent who continued to push her to grow and learn. Her superintendent had that “willingness to answer questions and engage in dialogue without sugar coating anything,” and Faith found his honesty to be helpful. “Even when I didn’t ask,” he was there providing feedback because, through her experiences, Faith had an “openness to receive the feedback, even if it was corrective in nature.” Walking through problems and exploring situations with “what you could have done, here is what you could have said” was beneficial for her as she grew into her position. The superintendent was the one who eventually prompted her to take the next step in her career, “to apply for a superintendent position.”

After 19 years away from home, Faith came across the opportunity to move back to her home district as an executive director of student services. While she was specifically “applying for superintendent positions at the time...I only applied because it was my home district.” Her husband agreed to go for it because “well, the weather is better,” and they

made the big move back to Faith's hometown. Drawing on her experiences as an instructional leader helped her be "successful working with the curriculum and instruction department" she supervised. She also again had a great working relationship with the superintendent of the district. He showed her "that there is not one way to deal with an issue" while also at the same time, "not holding my hand through the process." That trust and freedom forced Faith to "multitask and brainstorm, create solutions and move forward, while also standing behind your decision and through your decision."

Collaborating and being successful in her position allowed her to change her title the next year and be named an associate superintendent for student services, providing even more collaboration with the superintendent of the district. When her superintendent embarked on a new journey in a nearby district, Faith moved into the superintendent position. She recalled the change:

It was a change for me. I'm thinking when I was assistant like, oh I could do that, but you change your thought pattern once you get in that seat. It's like woah, it is a lot more than I thought, but it's what you're dealing with.

With her new position, for her first year, she participated in a yearlong urban superintendent academy, which provided support and connections to other superintendents serving in the urban setting. By becoming the superintendent, she soon found herself collaborating with area superintendents: "Luckily, I work with a lot of wonderful superintendents throughout the area," who were able to answer her questions. One of the most beneficial superintendents though was her past superintendent, who was right down the road, and she could call and "go to him and say okay, tell me this, when you made this decision, what were you thinking? He's able to walk me through it. Well Faith, here are the issues, talk to this person. It has helped."

Looking back over her career, Faith said, “I would probably say that all of my career experiences make me a better professional today.” From understanding the importance of family connections and relationships when she was a social worker, to “learning how to bridge gaps between staff, students, and home,” to also understanding “the dynamics of poverty, institutional racism, and things of that nature, really have helped me....It has all helped.”

George. Although George tried to leave the small town upon graduating high school, the small town did not leave George. Growing up in a small, rural community, he was told “You should be an engineer, an architect, or something else,” but he knew that his heart was not in it. Regardless of what his heart said, he graduated with a degree in math and a minor in physical education. Still going along the pathway others set out for him, he immediately enrolled and landed in a graduate program, halfway across the country. Pursuing a graduate degree in the biomechanics field, George figured he would work at the university level and become a professor. After being there only for a year, he recalls the pressure of that world, the “publish or perish” demands. He also witnessed:

I had a faculty member there that was tremendous, who didn’t make tenure that year. I looked at his life situation thinking you know he’s 45 years old and he’s going to start over. I thought, well, that’s not really what I thought it was going to be, so I came back home and went to work for my dad on the family farm.

He enjoyed working on the family farm, but he felt something was still missing. After five years, he decided to reactivate his teaching credentials because “I had been out of education so long.” He ended up being hired by his old high school science teacher and being mentored by another past teacher. George believes that “They knew me as a student, and you know, trusted that I would do good things for kids just by hiring me and giving me a

chance and working with me.” He “got off to a good start just by having that kind of a supportive environment.”

George wore many hats in that environment. He was “the math teacher, taught some computer science courses, but then in a small school setting you get to be the activities director, the technology coordinator, the basketball coach, and the volleyball coach.” As a 26-year-old, first-year educator, “you got to and had to do a little bit of everything.” Because he had been gone from education so long, he also needed to take some classes at the nearby university in order to be a certified teacher. Logically, he thought if he had to take some hours, he was going to make them apply for a degree and set out to complete his master’s degree in secondary leadership.

Moving to take on leadership roles, George sought to “impact more kids and be a bigger part of the overall system” and “naturally gravitated toward leadership roles.” There was also some “economics” too, as “you get a better quality of life” with the monetary increase, but the overall driver was “the opportunity to impact the system in a bigger way.” To gain experience, George worked on committees, oversaw programs, and wrote grants to benefit the district. Working in a small district gave George the opportunity to “dabble in a lot of different things.”

When he was almost done with the degree, just lacking his internship hours, he jumped at the opportunity to work in another small town as an assistant high school principal. He actually “finished up their final requirements of the internship on the job.” Working under a “veteran principal,” George “got off to a good start” in educational leadership. Learning from the principal, another person “from a farm background,” it was

not hard for him to figure out the algorithm used in the school: “Figure out what’s going to be good for kids and make it happen.”

He finished his master’s degree and immediately started working on his educational specialist degree in school district administration “before the days of cohorts.” George found himself driving one night a week, “not too terribly long” to attend classes. Attending a familiar school was both “convenient” and “it had a good reputation.” During the summertime, he found himself swamped with a full course load as he worked to better himself and his leadership craft. In one finance class, it did not take long for George to realize he was learning from a “really smart” superintendent. After a short period of time, George realized that he had “an aptitude for understanding school finance and how the state funding formula worked.” During this time, George would jump at the chance to “study finance related items, that was my interest level.”

During the school year, he could always count on interactions with the superintendent since he was “right down the hallway, he was in the same building, so you had that constant interaction with your district leader that allowed you again opportunities to do things.” One such opportunity for George to apply his mathematics and design thinking was one snow day, when he “drew up a scenario where we could add onto our K-8 campus on both ends of the building and tear out the old section in the middle and have an elementary school.” After a passed bond issue and two years later, “that was almost essentially the plan.” The benefit of working in a small district was again apparent as George recalls:

I think if I were in a large district it wouldn’t even have entered my mind that I could share after I got done with that. I walk down the hall. So, what do you think about

this? He says. I like it. So that small environment experience I think it was a valuable one for me.

Collectively, all the hard work paid off, because after three years of being an assistant principal, the head principal retired, and George took over.

George continued to grow in his leadership skills and abilities over that first year as a head principal, and afterwards, he was hired as an Assistant Superintendent of Business in the town where he completed his graduate work. He recalled, “That’s one of the advantages of working in a smaller system is that you can move faster if you demonstrate any level of skills or aptitude in the process.” He was charged with all the support services in the district, “the finance, facilities, child nutrition, transportation, you know, all those areas that are support areas.” Everything was “very good experience” because it allowed him to grow as a leader at the district level. Due to the “many different areas of supervision,” he began to be active in statewide organizations. This outlet was huge for George, who could reach out to “that network beyond the school district” because he was the only person in the district doing that job and he simply could not “ask anyone else.” He also recalls collaborating with others outside the district “in car rides to go to big meetings or conferences because we would carpool.” Networking was also done through professional organizations, which connected George to others doing the same work.

During this time, George also had the opportunity to work with a superintendent whom he admired greatly, who had been recently recognized at the state level as Superintendent of the Year. Working under “an exceptional leader,” who could view the big picture and think in terms of long-range planning, presented George with a different style of leadership. Although his mentor never said it, his actions taught George that:

You want to hire really good people, you want to pay them as well as you can possibly pay them, and then expect a whole lot out of them. And so, in his mind, have fewer people, pay them really well, but make sure they're high quality, so they can get the job done, and so that was his general philosophy. He got to say no a lot with that philosophy that you know, we want to add this position, we want to add that, we need to add this or what have you. He would just say no, that's going to get in the way of us being able to pay teachers the best rate we can to hire the best.

During his time as assistant superintendent, George also had the opportunity to attend cabinet meetings, which “are very, very informative.”

In this role, he decided to again go back to school and started his doctoral program. He went through the “cohort program” that he initially learned about when he was a teacher. The choice of university was not hard for George, “I don't understand why people do the private school doctoral program. I don't get that why you pay extra money for less in my mind.” The program consisted of some online work, one night a week on campus, and then a lot of time in the summer on campus completing coursework—which made it again, “economical and convenient.” One major takeaway George recalled was when a professor always used the term “complicate your thinking.” Having an analytical mind, George naturally saw situations as “black and white” while in reality, “the challenge put in front of us was never as simple as you think.” This required him to view problems from multiple perspectives, from different understandings, and that “just because something can be done one way, doesn't mean it's the best way for the entire group or the community or the system.” During his time at central office, George worked on his leadership skills, specifically to view things from different perspectives and try to “get consensus” before making a decision.

Although he spent five years working as assistant superintendent and completed all the coursework for his doctorate, he did not quite get to the dissertation before he was hired

as an assistant superintendent and “Chief Financial Officer (CFO)” of a rapidly growing district. George was “one of the rare people who worked as a CFO who didn’t have a CPA license or a finance degree. I was a math teacher.” The job was demanding, and George struggled to get his dissertation work done because the job was “overwhelming.” Moving into a larger district that was the fastest growing district in the state and being in charge of finance and facilities, George had his work cut out for him. In his five years, he passed multiple bond issues, built a new high school, built two new elementary schools, and built new additions onto ten buildings. He recalls, “it was a crazy experience, but it was a good experience.” Through these learning opportunities, George worked to be an expert at his craft, joining professional organizations and working at the state level with legislators when school funding was brought to the floor. Also, during this time he had the opportunity to again work and learn with a recent Superintendent of the Year award winner. Before the completion of his fifth year and his graduation, George was hired to take over as the superintendent of his current district.

Taking over the job, George set out to ensure there were ways to continue to collaborate with others in the area, hosting monthly informal meetings for a group of superintendents at his office. The opportunity to have a “sounding board, somebody that you can run things by and know the immediate area, that is very helpful.” Constantly working to grow his network which “pays dividends over and over again,” he continues to be active in superintendent organizations and other organizations related to the field of education. Having spent six years in his current district, George has had the opportunity to reflect on his experiences and “regardless of how much time I spent in each of those

positions, it gave me a chance to experience different aspects of the organization. Each position was just as important as who I worked for.”

Harvey. His whole goal in life was to move from playing college basketball to becoming a head basketball coach. After graduating from his hometown college with a degree in physical education, this dream took a detour when there were no high school vacancies in which to start his coaching career. Harvey “reluctantly took the job” as a physical education teacher at an elementary school that would drastically change the trajectory of his life. In the elementary school setting, Harvey “absolutely fell in love with the kids.” The impact he could have on their social beings in school and the “huge contribution to their education” was the deciding factor that made the dream of becoming a coach vanish.

Teaching elementary school students was a “wonderful experience” for Harvey. Teaching, along with lunch supervisions and bus duties, gave him the opportunity to build strong relationships with some of the toughest kids in school. After a while “some of the teachers started sending their kids to me when they were in trouble,” and he began to branch out to take on leadership roles throughout the building. Also, during this time he went back to pursue his elementary administration master’s degree. His building principal took notice that he was doing his job well and building strong relationships with students. From then on, Harvey was the “informal assistant principal,” helping out anywhere he could. “I think that sometimes, just a great way to establish a relationship with your boss is to just do what they ask,” which then moved to Harvey asking, “what else could I do.”

Soon, the principal was sharing his great work throughout the district, and he got a visit from the Director of Elementary Education, who suggested he “go to the middle or

high school level because a PE teacher wouldn't make a good elementary school principal.” This piqued Harvey into spending his daily plan periods observing and working with classroom teachers to better understand classroom instruction. “I knew what good instruction was and what was bad instruction.” In his second year, his principal “took off around February for vacation, and the funny part about this is that I don't think that the district knew and so we didn't really have any issues because I was handling behavior.”

His ability to handle behavior and overcoming the instructional barrier of not being in the classroom led to Harvey receiving a call. “I was sitting on my couch and the Director of Elementary Education asked me if I would be interest in starting an alternative school.” This director would go on to play different roles throughout Harvey's growth as a leader, and she was “by far the smartest educator I have ever been around. She is constantly learning.” Harvey “took on” the challenge to create a K-8 program from scratch. He hired staff, developed curriculum, and designed a program to build strong relationships between the students who were kicked out of school for eight weeks and their homeroom teachers. “It was a really cool program.”

After two years, the “Director of Elementary Education and the superintendent stopped by one day and asked me to visit with them.” He was offered a head elementary principal position that “was in the same feeder pattern that I graduated high school from.” It allowed him to regularly connect with his dad, the middle school principal. Working in a large elementary school building with “around 80% free and reduced lunch” allowed Harvey to hone his skills on a larger student population. He formed relationships with other principals as he learned to manage the large school. During this time, he also learned the mantra of “two of three.” In the building, you have “your kids, your parents, and your

teachers. You know you have to have the support of two of them in order to keep your job.”

At the end of his second year, Harvey recalled:

My dad told me that he was retiring and the same day I get a call from our past chief financial officer and asked me if I would be interested in coming down to his new district to be an elementary school principal.

Being born and raised in the district and having his father retiring, made Harvey “have that feeling of loss.” Talking it over with his wife, he decided, “Maybe there’s better opportunities” in the new district that would provide more for his newborn son, and he applied for the position.

Harvey was hired and immediately found himself in a much different school than he served in before. “I did not like it.” While being only half the size of his previous elementary school, the student needs were drastically different. After his first year, he went to his superintendent and “asked him that if a title one building was to come open if he would consider me for it?” He got his chance the following year and was moved to a high need elementary school in the district. Harvey stated, “I thought I would be there longer” but they were having some issues at the local middle school and the superintendent asked him to move. “I work for him right, so I said no problem.”

Just before moving to the middle school, Harvey traveled to attend the National Elementary Principal conference with other principals in the district. Together they spent time looking over college and university booths as they looked for a good fit to pursue their doctoral degrees. They soon “ran into a table” of one university starting a cohort in the city where they were from. With experiences from collaborating with “the same cohort of people who ran rural schools” during his graduate degrees, Harvey was intrigued to experience a program that was designed to provide “suburban and urban experiences for leaders.”

Working in an elementary school with over 80% free and reduced lunch, “I could hardly stand being with [small town leaders] anymore because I wasn’t growing professionally by being a part of that, so I thought it would be worth it.” Harvey felt it was “good to get out of that same cohort,” and soon he was attending class since there was “no such thing as online courses then. You had to show up and be present at the course.”

The program was set up for Harvey to collaborate every other weekend for three years as a cohort and then “a residency requirement in the summer for a couple weeks.” After a year of the program, though, “people dropped the program” and Harvey’s cohort folded into another one in a city four hours away. This new challenge required him to now spend much more time away from home, travelling over the weekend to complete classes. Harvey thought the program was worth it because “they brought in large district superintendents for the most part to teach the courses.” Having practitioners teach the courses made it authentic and because they were from districts with tens of thousands of students, Harvey could relate to the challenges presented.

Harvey ran into another challenge when a professor required Harvey to write a paper on “how to change organizational practices within your organization.” Harvey recalls “struggling with the whole concept” until, after the fourth draft of his paper, the professor said, “There is no way you can be superintendent if you don’t understand how to make change happen in a large organization.” From this challenge, he had “the biggest ‘aha’ moments for me as I thought, well if I go through this program, I’ll be ready to be a superintendent.” That coursework challenge set the tone for the program, and he formed a strong bond with the professor, which would carry over the next 20 years.

If classes were not taught by practitioners, they were “taught by researchers who could provide really high levels of professional development.” Although “a lot of people had strong egos” in the program, if you “listen close enough, you could learn a lot about school leadership.” Working with other school leaders from around the country provided Harvey with the opportunity to build his network and “some of the relationships you build in those programs and experiences you build, prepare you to be the superintendent.” Overall, the program was “a wonderful experience.”

After graduating with his doctorate and being a middle school principal, he was prompted to go for a deputy superintendent position in another district, “but I still had to sit for the test...that’s when I knew I was going to need it.” After completing his superintendent certification, he was “eligible for the job” but his current superintendent “pulled me aside and told me if I was patient, that there’d be a spot for me here.” After the next year, he was offered the job of assistant superintendent of operations for the large district. Working in that capacity over the next 18 years allowed Harvey to experience a variety of situations and different leaders at the central office level. “I was fortunate to get the spot.”

Harvey was in charge of human resources, custodians, maintenance, food service, and transportation, “just day-to-day operations for a school district, pretty much.” Coming into the position, the current superintendent had a distinctive leadership style; he was “just everybody’s grandpa.” He “would come in smiling, eat whatever was at the table, then sit in the back of the room and kind of watch.” Harvey found it easy to learn from him and his leadership style, which was effective. After his retirement, the new superintendent stepped in and it “was almost a 180.” Harvey recalls “he didn’t really want to talk to anybody” and ran the school district like a business, “which wasn’t wrong, just different.” The

superintendent was goal orientated and very driven to reach those goals. Harvey recalled from those years:

My job was to make sure nothing got to the superintendent. My job was to take care of everything, upset parent, upset teacher, principals, non-effective schools, whatever it was, it was my job to make sure the superintendent didn't have to worry about it. All he had to have was talking points for the board in terms of what we were doing to fix the problem. If he didn't like the talking points, I'd get him new ones, you know. Do all you can to support the superintendent.

Through those countless years in the position, Harvey was "forced to learn" about the innermost workings of the district above his position and below. Harvey learned that the superintendent position in the district was to "satisfy those seven people" on the board and do political events outside of the school to show the district was effective and worthy of the next bond or levy issue trying to be passed.

After 18 years in the position, his superintendent retired, and Harvey fully understood what the next position required of him. He was able to move up to fill the position. At the time of the study, Harvey was just completing his third year. His first year, he was assigned a mentor, but the relationship was ineffective, as "what he deals with and what I deal with are completely different things." Working in one of the largest districts in the state, Harvey instead relied on the relationships formed through his years as an assistant superintendent and those from his past education. He capitalized on his relationships with other large district superintendents or past superintendents to "help me get a foot in the door" when exploring new initiatives or programs that other districts are already doing. "Those relationships at the end of the day are the ones who have helped me along the most."

Group Composite Report

The following composite report constitutes the synthesis of meaning for the essence of the phenomenon through the lived experiences of all seven co-researchers in this study. These collective perspectives have been connected and provide a unified essence of their experiences. Through all seven textural, structural, and textural/structural descriptions, themes emerged which allowed a synthesis of the essence to be constructed. The following were the themes that were constructed in all co-researchers' descriptions: *continued education, course experiences, professional moves, mentoring/networking, relationships,* and *challenges*. The composite group report provides a universal description of their experiences, representing their feelings of preparedness to take over the role of superintendent.

Composite report for co-researchers. All seven co-researchers started the journey down to the pathway to the superintendency without ever knowing that the path would lead them to the superintendency and the challenges they would overcome to get there. Half struggled to find their initial start in education, with Ernest taking the “grand tour of state colleges and universities” to become a conservation agent, Chester going to school for a “business degree,” George spending half a decade farming, and Faith studying to become a social worker. Others went to undergraduate school, ready and focused to enter the field of education upon graduation. Regardless of how they started their career, all co-researchers, as Ernest would say, “finally got my stuff straight” and ended up in teaching positions.

This start in education ranged from elementary school teachers and a physical education coach to a middle school teacher to high school science and math teachers. Positions ranged from small, rural schools all the way to large, suburban schools. While the

starting positions and locations varied, co-researchers experienced commonalities in their interactions and relationships while in their first years in education. Within their first few years or while in their first teaching position, co-researchers had the opportunity to build relationships with staff and leaders, who pushed them to continue their learning in one fashion or another.

For the most part, building leaders saw potential in the co-researchers and worked to build leadership capacity by providing leadership opportunities. These opportunities allowed each to gain valuable experience and a chance to see if they had what it took to lead. Harvey stepped up in the building, “managing student behavior and dealing with all the discipline.” He was taken under his building principal’s wing and given experiences to help prepare him for what he wanted to do, to become an “elementary school principal.” As a master teacher, Faith stepped up and “under filled or filled in for the building administrators when they were out of the building,” showing she had the capacity to lead and could be trusted running the building in their absence. George was mentored by his past teachers, who moved into administration roles, who trusted him to develop the skills to make a positive impact and “do what’s best for kids.” He also took it upon himself to “work on committees, oversee programs, and write grants to benefit the district” to showcase his abilities and aptitude.

In contrast, Briana and Darren both lacked that initial strong start and support, and each felt isolated. Regardless of their isolation, both wanted to grow and develop as leaders. While they missed that nurturing start from leaders or mentors, they soon caught up to the other co-researchers along the pathway when all co-researchers eventually enrolled in graduate school to become “building level administrators.” Each were prompted to get their start in programs from different places. Faith “was kind of pushed or coerced” by other

leaders, Briana was “just trying to get help on my own,” and Darren had that intrinsic drive to just “want to grow and learn.” Choosing higher education institutions was easy for the group as they chose what was “convenient,” “a good value,” “economical,” and “familiar.” All believed they chose programs that were “reputable” and that they could attend as, “this was a time before online classes were a thing.” Through their master’s programs, co-researchers got a taste of leadership education and began to make their beginning network of connections with other aspiring leaders.

This preparation as aspiring leaders allowed each to eventually move into an assistant principal role in their district, besides Briana, who “moved straight into the principalship.” From their positions as assistant principals and when each moved into the principalship, co-researchers were all met with challenges they had to learn from and overcome. Although Darren thought he had a firm grasp on how to create change in a school, he failed to navigate “the waters” and learned through “a baptism by fire.” Ernest’s building level experience was in constant turmoil as each year, a new superintendent took the helm, which was coupled with leading a “ridiculously intense” large, diverse school building. Building level work allowed each co-researcher the opportunity to lead staff and implement initiatives at the building level, allowing them to develop their leadership style and a chance to “figure things out.”

All co-researchers eventually pursued their education specialist degree or made moves to earn their doctoral degrees either while they were teachers, building administrators, or employed at the district office level. While all had the common goal of “obtaining their degree,” each encountered different challenges as they worked on their doctoral degrees. Briana’s committee chair “left halfway through the process” and required

her to still work through her, even though she was out of state at another university.

Darren's advisor was less than supportive and as a result, he had to "go through a living hell" as he was required to rework his entire dissertation at the last minute. Harvey's "local cohort collapsed," resulting in him traveling over four hours one way every other weekend for two years.

While each co-researcher encountered challenges in their doctoral programs, each also created long lasting and important relationships. Faith made connections to instructors and other students who lived throughout the country and whom she can "call or text and get an answer back pretty quickly." Ernest also made connections through collaboration with other leaders as they collectively worked to "solve the major problems in education." Certain classes also presented challenges in their program which co-researchers worked to overcome. Darren's first class was extremely hard and was "designed to be a weed-you-out class." Briana recalled working to overcome a "communications class" in which she learned how to effectively communicate with her audiences.

Even though co-researchers completed their graduate work at different times and while in different positions, each at one point gained "valuable" central office level experience before assuming the superintendent position. Only Ernest, who moved from a high school principalship into the superintendency, did not spend any time at the district office level, which required him to "pick things up along the way." Co-researchers recall cabinet meetings being "very, very informative" and a time during which they could "witness the superintendent working with the administrative team." Central office positions also provided opportunities to "work with boards of education" and learn how to develop the essential "superintendent and board relationship." Lastly, in this position, co-researchers had

an opportunity to be mentored, in one fashion or another, by the current superintendent, learning about leadership and “learning to do what’s best for kids.”

Overall, co-researchers were presented with challenges throughout their journey to the superintendency. Each, in their own way, overcame the challenges and worked to be successful in their positions. While each started off on their own journey to the superintendency, each took a unique pathway full of experiences and learnings that resulted in all ending up as a superintendent of schools in the Midwest.

Reporting of the Findings Based on the Research Questions

The central overarching research question drove this study: What essences of meaning do superintendents have of their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent? The following sub-questions were posed:

- a. What meanings do they communicate about the role of professional experiences in their preparation for superintendent?
- b. In what ways do they describe the role of higher education programs in their preparation for superintendent?
- c. How do they experience the role of mentoring in their preparation for superintendent?

The responses to the research questions were uncovered through the themes identified from documents, observations, and interviews. Document and observation themes were synthesized from interpretive codes, which were created from the descriptive codes during the data analysis steps. I describe the theme, *incremental improvement*, as increasing movement toward the set objective. The theme, *meetings as ceremonies*, is demarcated as a

performance constructed for a specific formal occasion. Lastly, the theme of *superintendent as storyteller* is defined as a narrator of events and giver of information.

Interview themes were constructed from co-researchers' invariant horizons/constituents or meaning units of their experiences of preparation during data analysis. Interview transcripts were manually reviewed to determine themes, which served to validate the categories through the frequency of common key words and phrases. Theme organization occurred when meaning units were first identified and then put into categories that appeared common among all co-researchers in relation to the phenomenon. This process allowed common themes or meaning units to be highlighted and be visible.

The following are the themes from interviews that depicted the essence of the phenomenon for the seven participants: (1) Professional Moves, (2) Continued Education, (3) Challenges, (4) Networking/Mentoring, and (5) Relationships. I define professional moves as stepping up into a new position that has more responsibility and is more impactful. The theme Continued Education is demarcated as growing in leadership knowledge and practice. Challenges are expressed as encountering major obstacles and hindrances. Networking/Mentoring is described as having connections and support from others. Lastly, the theme of Relationships is defined as having a strong connection and recurring contact. While themes were slightly different in their meanings in some instances, the five themes were common in all seven participant responses.

Tables 3 and 4 delineate the themes and interpretive codes identified in documents and observations. Table 5 presents the invariant constituents or themes from the interviews.

Table 3

Themes from the Documents

Theme	Co-researcher						
	Briana	Chester	Darren	Ernest	Faith	George	Harvey
Incremental Improvement IC: <i>High Standards</i> IC: <i>Focal Point</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note. IC = Interpretative Code.

Table 4

Themes from the Observations

Theme	Co-researcher						
	Briana	Chester	Darren	Ernest	Faith	George	Harvey
Meetings as Ceremonies IC: <i>Atmosphere</i> IC: <i>Official</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Superintendent as Storyteller IC: <i>Liaison</i> IC: <i>Calculated</i> IC: <i>Informed</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note. IC = Interpretative Code.

Table 5

Themes from the Interviews

Theme	Co-researcher						
	Briana	Chester	Darren	Ernest	Faith	George	Harvey
Challenges	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Continued Education	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family	X		X	X	X		
Intrinsic Drive	X				X		
Networking/ Mentoring	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Professional Moves	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Relationships	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Each sub-question is reported with the theme(s) from the data and in support of the findings; co-researchers' quotes purposely reinforce the theme grounded in relevant theory and research. I begin with the first sub-question, which centers on how co-researchers communicated the role of professional and career experiences in their preparation.

Sub-question a) What Meanings Do They Communicate about the Role of Professional Experiences in their Preparation for Superintendent?

Co-researchers communicated various experiences while in different professional roles that prepared them for their position as superintendent. To address this question, the interview theme *professional moves* was present in all descriptions and was defined as positions in the superintendent's career. *Professional moves* allowed varied experiences, as co-researchers were teachers, building level administrators, and central office

administrators. At different levels, each had different experiences that were impactful to their current position.

All co-researchers worked as a classroom teacher in one capacity or another starting off their education career, which aligns with Brunner and Grogan's (2005) thought that most superintendents begin as teachers in the classroom. Working in a small district allowed Chester as a teacher to "pretty much get a dose of everything" while he wore multiple hats for the district, but it was hard work. The work "wasn't glamorous." Being able to have opportunities to experience different positions while as a teacher allowed him to develop leadership skills. George also worked in a small district, which means "you got to and had to do a little bit of everything." Wearing multiple hats allowed each co-researcher to begin to understand the different parts working within a "large system" and understand how each small system impacted the larger.

Faith worked hard to master her craft as a teacher while she tried to transition from an "instructional leader to an administrative leader." Her experiences working with teachers, and helping them to reflect on their practices, allowed her to also become reflective in her leadership. This allowed Faith to reflect on her work with "leaders that were phenomenal and leaders who weren't so great." Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) contended that many successful classroom teachers use their experience as teachers as a foundation for school leadership. Co-researchers' pathways followed Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch's (2011) different moves into administration. The first transition, and the most common move, was of self-initiation, when they decided to apply for a position as a natural progression or a long-standing goal, and the second transition was recruiting/tapping, a common circumstance surrounding moves as administrators were recruited by fellow leaders for specific positions.

As a building leader, Darren learned “hard lessons” about how to enact change at the building level. Ernest also recalled his professional experiences and that during that time, “it is all about the number of experiences you have, because experiences are opportunities to figure out how to solve problems. The more opportunities or chances to solve problems, the more likely you’ll be successful down the road.” All co-researchers were presented with problems throughout their experiences as building administrators which were related to changing the culture of the building and also increasing student achievement/success. This aligned with Stronge, Richard, and Catano’s (2008) statement that “leading instructional efforts in a school have evolved into a primary role for school principals” (p. 3).

Björk (2000) and Glass (2000) reported on the background of those who obtained central office positions and found that those who worked through the elementary setting may have been obstructed due to the limited visibility as leaders compared to secondary leaders. This is in contrast to this study, in which half of the co-researchers traveled through the elementary pathway to a central office position. All but one co-researcher (Ernest) spent time at the central office level before assuming the role of superintendent. At the central office level, Briana was “given a really great opportunity...I felt very much supported and ready to take on that role” when she had a full year as an assistant superintendent to learn from the departing assistant superintendent. This slow immersion year and another 16 years in the position allowed her to “attended cabinet meetings and board of education meetings,” where she witnessed superintendents work with boards of education and others. She recalled, “I think that was good just being able to be a part of an administrative team.”

Spending 18 years as an assistant superintendent allowed Harvey, through many leaders and experiences, to learn different skills. Observing and understanding different

leadership styles, while working constantly with the superintendent, allowed him to craft and develop his own leadership style to be effective. The experiences of all the co-researchers at the central office level aligned with the finding of the Wallace Foundation (2010) that experiences, depending on the position, can include working with principals to improve instruction, supporting other administrators with resources (including, for example, professional development trainings), reorganizing/managing other central office units, providing stewardship, and gathering and using information to guide the vision/mission of the school district.

Throughout his pathway to the superintendency, Darren remarked that “on-the-job experiences were more valuable than anything else I could have done.” Concentrating on the jobs at hand allowed him to constantly grow as a leader from those around him and working with other assistant superintendents throughout the area. Faith echoed this sentiment, saying, “I would probably say that all of my career experiences make me a better professional today.” Both statements supported Freely and Seinfeld’s (2012) research, who examined pathways of retired superintendents to gain insight into the positions critical in their preparation. The researchers found that the specific position the superintendent held before did not impact their preparation as much as their broad and diverse experiences within those positions.

Professional moves were reinforced by the document theme *incremental improvement*. Through each of their positions, co-researchers were making incremental moves up the “hierarchical” ladder, gaining more prestige, power, and money with each move up. Callan and Levinson (2011) reaffirmed that the pathway to the superintendency begins with classroom teaching and following the success in their classroom teaching, these

pre-superintendents typically obtained their administrative degree/certification to move to a principal or central/district office position, which was the case with all co-researchers.

The theme *professional moves* was also reinforced by the observational theme of *superintendent as storyteller*. Through the observations, co-researchers were observed as givers of information that they gained through their work in their current positions or from previous positions. Superintendents were knowledgeable about the district and topics being discussed/presented, possibly from their career experiences, resulting in their ability to act as a liaison between the board of education and others. Co-researchers' interactions are associated with the work of Bird and Wang (2013), who maintained that leaders must be flexible, fluid, and situational in their leadership styles. This ability to change their leadership style to address the situation will determine superintendents' successes or lack thereof.

Sub-question b) In What Ways Do They Describe the Role of Higher Education Programs in Their Preparation for Superintendent?

Co-researchers described the role of higher education programs in their preparation for the superintendency in a variety of ways, which resulted in three themes constructed from interviews. The first theme, *continued education*, was defined as superintendents gaining multiple degrees and certifications from institutions. The second theme, *course experiences*, was noted as those experiences that happened as a result of coursework. The last theme, *challenges*, were obstacles and trials crucial for superintendents to overcome during their higher education experiences.

The theme of *continued education* was reinforced by all co-researchers as the number of degrees possessed by each ranged from three to five. With so many colleges and

university programs available for aspiring leaders to pursue their advanced degrees, co-researchers selected higher education institutions based on a variety of factors. While Darren continued to return to his institution because it was “reputable” and had a “fraternal” feel, George chose his because it was “a good value.” Almost all co-researchers commented on the “convenience” of their programs of choice. This continued education coincided with the findings of Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) that regardless of the selection or choice of program, almost all (99.7%) superintendents have some type of graduate degree. As part of the selection requirement for this study, all co-researchers possessed a doctoral degree, while Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) stated that only around 45% of superintendents achieve a doctoral degree. Each understood the importance of continuing their education to move up the career ladder and also realized certification requirements for the position.

If they did not hold the necessary degree and the necessary certification, they were, as Harvey said, “not eligible” for the job. While it took time for a majority of co-researchers to understand their pathway, once it was established, co-researchers continued to return to higher education institutions for degrees and certification/licensures. Briana recalled that it also “makes me more marketable” as educational leaders look to move into a new, higher position. All co-researchers obtained their certifications along with their degrees, which aligned with Gilmour and Kinsella’s (2009) assertion that state certification or licensure for school leaders often occurs through advanced degree programs at higher education institutions. None of the co-researchers mentioned being unsuccessful in their attempts to gain certification or pass the licensure exam at the building or district level. Shelton (2010)

noted that many preparatory curriculums are structured in order to ensure aspiring leaders are prepared to meet licensure requirements rather than mastering knowledge and skills.

All of their higher education programs provided the co-researchers with *course experiences* in which they were able to grow and learn. Several past superintendents brought attention to this coursework and advised students to carefully determine which workshops, academies, and college or university courses will provide the appropriate knowledge to begin work as a superintendent (Callan & Levinson, 2011; Kowalski, 2006). Throughout the theme of *course experiences*, each superintendent spoke about the classes that were worthwhile, which were all facilitated by central office or superintendent practitioners. Those instructors who had real life experiences and could present authentic tasks helped in their overall preparation. Ernest reinforced this meaning by saying, “unless you have actual practitioners teaching those courses, it is very difficult for a university instructor to teach what operating a school is really like.” Murphy (2007) endorsed the importance of practice and connections, rather than theories. Kowalski, Peterson, and Fusarelli (2009) reinforced co-researchers’ perceptions of the importance of the quality of instruction and relevancy of instruction (e.g., a professor’s ability to teach and the infusion of contemporary problems into courses) as the most beneficial by novice superintendents.

Briana recalled coursework related to a meaningful “communications class” in which she learned how to change her thinking about communication. Through this she learned to truly listen to others and understand the audience’s perspective. Although George loved math going into the finance course, the work he completed with his class and professor allowed him to discover his aptitude for numbers, leading him to a position as a chief financial officer of a school district. Overall, co-researchers struggled to recall specific

courses that helped them in their preparation, which aligns with Fry, Bottoms, O'Neill, and Walker's (2007) assertion that few programs help develop competencies for leaders.

Co-researchers all had to overcome *challenges* as they progressed through their higher education programs. These challenges could have occurred during their regular coursework or during their dissertation work. For Darren, the first challenge came in the first class in which he had to "work damn hard" in order to pass and is something that he felt, "worked to weed people out" who should not have been in the program. For Harvey, the challenge came in the form of an assignment near the beginning of his program. During the class and one particular assignment, it took a while for him to understand what was required of him, but after the fourth try, he succeeded. Working on their dissertations, Briana's advisor left the school "in the middle" of her dissertation, and Darren had an advisor who "was pretty much worthless."

While co-researchers encountered their own set of unique challenges and problems, each overcame specific challenges. Past experiences are important and allow managers or leaders to make better decisions as a result of lessons learned (Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Grant, 2008). Also, the research conducted by Friedrich, Mumford, Vessey, Beeler, and Eubanks (2010) found that leaders who have expertise and problem-solving skills have a leader influence across the organization or group level, an important skill for a superintendent. From their experiences, each co-researcher learned the skill of problem-solving and grasped a better understanding of what was needed to overcome the barrier to achieve their goal or solve the problem.

Sub-question c) How Do They Experience the Role of Mentoring in Their Preparation for Superintendent?

Co-researchers experienced the role of mentoring in their preparation for the superintendency in a variety of ways, which resulted in two similar but distinctive themes or meaning units constructed from interviews. The first theme, *networking/mentoring*, was expressed as interacting with others to exchange information. The second theme, *relationships*, was defined as a bond that was created and revisited regularly.

Co-researchers regularly referenced instances in which *networking/mentoring* took place along their journey to the superintendency. Moore's (2012) study found that as connections were made within formal networks, the connections also transitioned to become informal networks for educational leaders. These informal connections were chances and opportunities to collaborate and grow from interactions with other aspiring leaders. Briana highlighted one such network, belonging to the state and area association for human resource directors. This network connected her to others who experienced the same work that she did, allowing her to ask questions and reaffirm her leadership abilities. George also connected to those who had titles similar to his. Those networks "beyond the school district," allowed him to be successful at his job because he was the only person in the district doing that job. He stated that he could not ask anyone else, resulting in him turning to his connections for support and guidance. These connections, according to George, "pay dividends over and over again." Callan and Levinson (2011) reaffirmed that the pathway to the superintendency generally involves "mentors and networking [that] are often key elements along the career path to the superintendency" (p. 13).

Faith grew her network in a different way. She participated in a year-long urban superintendents academy with other urban leaders as an assistant superintendent. This provided her an outlet to meet other urban leaders throughout the United States who served students in situations similar to hers. The collaboration with others helped Faith to better understand her leadership style and her position within the district. Through this network, she was able to continually connect and network with a few strong leaders. This link was important for her, as an ineffective match may be a key determinant of the success of the network (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). This strong match and regular contact allowed her to form strong *relationships* with other leaders as they all moved to the next level.

The co-researchers also referenced the strong *relationships* they created with influential people along the pathways they perceived as strengthening their feelings of preparedness for the position of superintendent. After Darren did not use a mentor in his teaching experiences, “to my fault,” he formed a strong relationship with his superintendent. This person was “very hands on,” and he “took a strong interest in me and my career developments.” Goldner and Mayseless (2009) found that having a strong interest significantly increased the relationship between the mentor and mentee and the benefits of the relationship.

Faith also worked to develop a strong relationship with her then superintendent. He was someone to whom she could go for advice and from him she learned “that there is not one way to deal with an issue.” Through the relationship, he taught Faith how to deal with problems and issues by not holding her hand through the process but providing her trust and freedom. This combination forced Faith to develop the leadership skills essential for her future position. Faith was ready for this leadership position, and her improvement was

corroborated by Thessin, Clayton, and Jamison (2018), who found that effective partnerships depended on the mentee's readiness for and commitment to the work.

Harvey also had strong relationships through his preparation for the superintendent position. Early in his career, a strong relationship with his building principal put him in a position to gain leadership experience otherwise not afforded to every physical education teacher. Also, after making connections to one of his course professors, he continued to build the relationship, talking to him "two to three times per week." Harvey recalled, "those relationships at the end of the day are the ones who have helped me along the most." The meaningful relationships co-researchers recalled from their experiences and the improvement of them through mentoring are confirmed in previous studies (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Rhodes et al., 2005).

Summary

The co-researchers' responses provided insight into the meaningful expressions and experiences that answered the research questions that drove this study. Through analysis of documents, observations, and interviews, themes were constructed and were used to answer each sub-question. Interviews provided rich, thick descriptions that allowed researchers to build upon common as well as unique perceptions and meanings of how they viewed their preparation for the position of superintendent. Chapter 6 provides implications of the findings, future research, and my reflections related to the interdisciplinary nature of educational leadership and curriculum. How did this inquiry further my own sense of preparation for the superintendent role? During this journey, what changes did I observe in myself?

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to address the problem of superintendents not being fully prepared to handle the complex responsibilities and demands of the position. The study was focused on understanding the essences of the meaning of preparation for the position. Experiences from seven co-researchers were examined to answer the central question: What essences of meaning do superintendents have of their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent? Chapter 6 builds on the findings and results presented in the previous chapter. This chapter briefly recaps the findings and discusses the implications in conjunction with relevant research. From the findings and implications, recommendations are offered and topics for future research are suggested. Lastly, a conclusion and final reflections are presented.

Implications of the Findings

Professional experiences played a crucial role in their preparation as co-researchers had opportunities to develop their leadership skills and knowledge at different levels. As teachers, they began to take on leadership roles in their buildings and learned about the different aspects outside of their classroom, understanding the building system better. As building leaders, they expanded on their understanding of past experiences to lead buildings toward growth and success. From experiences working with staff, students, parents, and central office leadership, each co-researcher had more occasions to solve problems. All the co-researchers' pathways aligned directly with Callan and Levinson's (2011) assertion that pre-superintendents began with classroom teaching and following that success, they obtained their administrative degree/certification to move into a principal position.

Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, and Ellerson's (2011) survey of over 1,800 current superintendents found that approximately 45% of superintendents started off as high school teachers, followed by 22% as elementary school teachers, and 20% as middle school teachers. Only 38% of superintendent co-researchers started off as high school teachers, 12% as middle school teachers, and 50% as elementary teachers which, even though this study had a small sample size, this might indicate a trend with more leaders emerging from elementary settings.

At the central office level, which all co-researchers experienced except one, they were able to expand building level experiences. The position allowed direct collaboration with superintendents, supporting direct observation and a better understanding of the position. This central office experience allowed the co-researchers opportunities to experience collaboration with other district leaders through cabinet meetings and chances to work with the board of education, all preparing them to take on the superintendent position. All these experiences directly aligned with the Wallace Foundation's (2010) recommendations that central office leaders and aspiring superintendents gain experiences working with principals to improve instruction, supporting other administrators with resources (including, for example, professional development trainings), reorganizing/managing other central office units, providing stewardship, and gathering and using information to guide the vision/mission of the school district. Chester, who did not have central office experience before moving into the position, recalled the challenge of having to learn many more things when he assumed the position of superintendent.

Overall, co-researcher pathways were slightly different; but through each position, experiences and opportunities to grow and learn were provided. Freely and Seinfeld (2012)

examined superintendent pathways of retired superintendents to gain insight into the positions critical in their preparation. The researchers found that the specific position the superintendent held before did not impact their preparation as much as their broad and diverse experiences within those positions, which mirrored the perspectives of this study's participants.

Co-researchers described the role of higher education in their preparation as enhancing knowledge, gaining experiences through coursework, and being presented with challenges. All co-researchers valued continuing their higher education as they gained the necessary degrees and certification required to move into new positions. While these choices ranged from programs located conveniently nearby or because the university was familiar, all co-researchers progressed through different degrees to earn their doctoral degree. Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) found regardless of the selection or choice of program, almost all (99.7%) of superintendents obtained some type of graduate degree.

Through the coursework, each easily recalled a course that was impactful to their preparation for their position which included: communication, district forecasting, and the most commonly cited, school finance. Kowalski, Petersen, and Fusarelli (2009) surveyed 117 novice superintendents to find out what courses were rated the most beneficial in their superintendent preparation at the higher education level. Findings suggested that new superintendents benefited from the practical dimensions of school administration (management courses such as finance and law), the relevancy of instruction (e.g., a professor's ability to teach and the infusion of contemporary problems into courses), and the quality of instruction. Co-researchers also stated that it was important for their professors to

be practitioners or recent practitioners as they had meaningful, real life experiences they could add to the course.

Lastly, through their higher education experiences, co-researchers were presented with challenges they had to overcome to be successful. These ranged from demanding professors and difficult coursework which required new ways of thinking to complications with their dissertations. While each encountered a different challenge, they were required to reapply themselves to overcome difficult encounters before moving forward. Stack (2016) stated the nature of challenges and what is required for progress:

Crises and obstacles test your mettle. They strip away facades to reveal what you can and can't do when under the gun. An obstacle may force you to reach deep inside to find new reserves, invent new ways to succeed, find ways to deal with unpleasant people... or it may stop you altogether. Either way, you learn what to do in the future, or what to improve upon before you can move forward again.

Mentoring was important for all co-researchers, as they progressed from building and central office leaders to the role of superintendent. Mentors prepared each co-researcher for their position and were utilized from the time they were aspiring teachers to their current positions as superintendents of schools. Co-researchers recalled making strong and lasting relationships with past supervisors and professors who mentored them as they developed their leadership skills. They also recalled those solid relationships they created with other district leaders, people who had similar jobs from whom they could learn. Their experiences mirrored the findings of Goldner and Maysless (2009), who found the quality of relationship between mentors and mentees was significant. Through their study of 84 mentees over an eight-month span, they discovered a clear association between the quality of the mentor relationship and the improvement of the mentee.

Regarding their assigned mentors as new superintendents, all co-researchers were passionately displeased with their experiences. Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent's (2004) analysis of over 70 studies on educational mentoring conveyed that almost of half (48.4%) of the studies reported problems for the mentors, and slightly less than half (42.8%) reported problems for mentees. The most cited problem of co-researchers with their assigned mentors was the professional expertise/personality mismatch. This led to many reaching out to other area superintendents to form relationships or use their past leaders as mentors. Moore (2012) found that it is often left up to the superintendent to seek out a meaningful mentor.

The co-researchers also mentioned professional organizations and the ability to network with others who have provided professional development and connections, helping them feel prepared for the position. The importance of networking was also mentioned in Moore's (2012) mixed-methods study of 57 female superintendents in which informal networks and alternative networks were "extremely beneficial" (p. 70). They provided opportunities to learn and expand on their experiences. Callan and Levinson (2011) mentioned the benefits of networking as a key element needed along the path to the superintendency. From the implications of the findings, several recommendations are warranted. The following recommendations are based on the data from the study as well as relevant research pertaining to the preparation of twenty-first superintendents.

Recommendations

Through the collection and analysis of the data from the co-researchers and from the themes identified and synthesized, the following are relevant actions for consideration based on the research conducted.

Time at Central Office

Aspiring superintendents should consider spending time in their career at the central office level. Six out of the seven co-researchers held a position at the central office level, each highlighting how valuable it was to work directly in conjunction with a superintendent and learning to collaborate with other district leaders. Ortiz (1982) suggested that because of the absence of central administration in small districts, the common career pattern for the superintendency in small districts was teacher, principal, and then superintendent rather than the path of larger districts, which was teacher, principal, central office administrator, and then superintendent. Even co-researchers coming from small districts moved into a central office position in a nearby larger district, which allowed leadership opportunities at the system level and provided meaningful preparation opportunities.

Employ Practitioners

Higher education programs and universities could employ acting or recently retired superintendents as professors. Co-researchers highlighted the significance of having actual practitioners teaching their course, having the creditability of understanding the position and being able to provide real life connections for aspiring leaders and pre-superintendents. Kowalski, Peterson, and Fusarelli (2009), who surveyed 117 novice superintendents, found a benefit of their higher education experiences was the quality of instruction and relevancy of instruction (e.g., a professor's ability to teach and the infusion of contemporary problems into courses).

Redesign Higher Education Curriculum

Co-researchers rarely recalled any meaningful classes in their higher education experiences. Any remarks that were made, were offhand remarks about the "typical classes"

all aspiring superintendents must take. While it may have been more than a few years since some co-researchers attended higher education classes, other co-researchers were more recent graduates. Based on the remarks of co-researchers and relevant literature, a redesign of higher education curriculum could be considered to prepare superintendents in the twenty-first century. This redesign is also echoed by Björk, Kowalski, and Young (2005), who noted that all higher education curricula should be revised in order to meet the new kind of leadership and challenges present in today's schools.

Preparation for current challenges. Currently, preparatory curricula are structured to ensure aspiring leaders are prepared to meet licensure requirements rather than mastery of knowledge and skills (Shelton, 2010). Superintendents in the twenty-first century will experience situations and challenges different from any other superintendents in history, and higher education programs should prepare them to take on those challenges. Challenges range from addressing equitable funding for school, minoritized populations of students, special education, and mental health. While co-researchers expanded on school finance, there were glaring omissions of preparation or connections made to address special education or mental health.

Faith was the only superintendent who raised a related challenge to these areas facing her district and how she was prepared to handle these issues. Rather than highlight an experience from one of her degrees focused on educational leadership, it was her undergraduate work seeking her social work degree that helped her now. From this work, she stated understanding “the dynamics of poverty, institutional racism, and things of that nature, really have helped me.” The literature reports that social justice leadership is limited in preparation programs (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Pounder, 2012). Styron and LeMire

(2009) affirmed that the structure, content, and implementation of educational leadership programs should prepare superintendents to promote social justice, equity, and inclusion throughout the district and community.

With the changing demographic landscape of the twenty-first century and the marginalization of certain groups, current research in educational leadership promotes leaders who advocate for cultural diversity and resist any form of exclusion or discrimination (O'Malley & Capper, 2015; Oplatka, 2009). Higher education preparation programs carry the responsibility of preparing school leaders for the new norm of cultural diversity within schools. School leaders need to understand and value students from diverse cultural backgrounds and believe in their ability to achieve academic success (Huber et al., 2012). Educational leadership programs could offer strategies to promote issues of cultural diversity and find ways to develop and expand their aspiring leaders' cultural competencies. This includes an appreciation for cultural diversity, an ability to connect with people from other cultures, and a commitment to fight oppression (Barakat, 2014).

School finance. Finance coursework in preparation programs could be evaluated to ensure they are worthwhile to students. Finance coursework was difficult for co-researchers because there was no connection for them to real life experiences, and the numbers were “just simply in front of them.” A recommendation, especially for smaller districts in which the superintendent acts as the chief financial officer, is to arrange a mentorship or coursework from acting or past chief financial officers. This provides an opportunity for superintendents to have meaningful knowledge and skills regarding the district budget and other finance areas; they can learn from someone who has real world experiences in school finance. Kowalski, Peterson, and Fusarelli (2009) emphasized a need for acquiring

meaningful experiences with school finance in their survey of 117 novice superintendents. They rated their least beneficial aspect of their preparation as the practical applications in school finance.

Understanding school finance is imperative for school superintendents as they fight for equitable funding at the local, state, and federal levels. Equitable funding for schools will continue to be a challenge as schools which can spend more per pupil provide students with a plethora of resources as opposed to other schools that struggle to provide basic educational resources. Samuel (2016) noted that education is often paid for with the amount of money available to a district, but that money does not necessarily equal the amount of money required to adequately teach students. Superintendents must fully understand school district spending, especially in poor or low-income districts, which can irreparably damage a student's future. Jackson, Johnson, and Persico (2016) found that nationwide, a 10% increase in per-pupil spending each year for 12 years of public education leads to 0.27 more completed years of education, 7.25% higher wages, and a 3.67% reduction in the annual incidence of adult poverty. The researchers found the effects even more pronounced for children from low-income families, drawing the connection that increased spending is directly linked to improvements in measured school quality. School superintendents must also be aware of school finance due to litigation on equitable school funding in almost every state. The federal government is working to aid schools but recognizes that education is the largest single component of government spending, accounting for 7.3% of GDP across the federal, state, and local expenditures (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013).

Meaningful internships/practicums. The importance or the role internships/practicum experiences played in their preparation for the superintendency in this study was almost completely absent. When recalling experiences during their higher education work, only Briana recalled her past internship:

I mean I had you know internship along the way, one in the elementary, one when I was beginning my principal certificate and one with my, superintendent when I was working on my doctorate. And what I would say about that is you know, those leaders are busy and so sometimes it is difficult for them to come up with authentic things for you to do to learn, because they are so busy themselves. And some of what they do is protected information and you know they can't really let you be a part of that.

Briana's comment brought to the light not only the absence of a meaningful superintendent internship while co-researchers worked to complete the requirements for their degree and certification, but also the absence of meaningful building level principal internships. This problem resonated with Glass (2006), who criticized internships that included too little hands-on experiences and no link between content and practice. This absence is in stark contrast to Levine's (2005) extensive report, *Educating School Leaders*, which highlighted the curricular balance and how the curriculum should integrate both theory and practice. Administrators can be presented with a balance of classroom/academic work and work in schools with successful practitioners.

Administrative internship or practicum experiences are a vital and key piece of the preparation of school superintendents (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Perez et al., 2010; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). During these experiences, aspiring school leaders may consider assuming roles at school sites or central offices to gain hands-on leadership experience. Higher education preparation programs need to provide administrative interns with authentic learning opportunities. Internship opportunities need to include mutually beneficial pairings

between the intern and supervisor, chances to collaborate with district personnel, and stimulate knowledge, skills, and abilities for success in a leadership role (Fry et al., 2007; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Thessin & Clayton, 2013). Internship experiences offer opportunities for students to turn their theory into actual practice, and these practical experiences should focus on relevant school leadership experiences (Callan & Levinson, 2011).

Mentoring

For mentoring, rather than following state mandates and assigning a mentor to new superintendents, a recommendation would be to allow superintendents to provide a list of mentors they would prefer. As cited by all participants, prearranged mentors were meaningless, “were a joke,” and did not provide the support intended. Allowing new superintendents to submit names of superintendents with whom they already have relationships or superintendents they know have similar districts and problems would provide meaningful mentor matches. In Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent’s (2004) review of 300 research-based papers on mentoring, unsuccessful matches between mentors and mentees were reported in 17% of related studies for mentors and almost 13% of mentee studies. These mis-matches stemmed from personality, ideology, or expertise differences, which echoes Harvey’s comment, “he didn’t have a clue what I was dealing with.”

Future Research

The results of this study continue to suggest that there is a need for more in-depth research and adds to the literature on how superintendents are prepared to handle the complex responsibilities of their jobs. The following are suggestions for future research:

- Continue to examine preparation experiences that superintendents identify as meaningful in the areas of career experiences, higher education experiences, and mentor experiences.
- Explore how higher education preparatory curriculums are structured in order to ensure aspiring leaders are prepared to lead school district. Peters (2015) stated that much of the curriculum used in schools today highlights a White, homogenous, Euro-Christian view, which does not reflect the make-up of America today. Research could be conducted to identify areas preparatory programs need to cover in order to prepare superintendents for the job. Furthermore, they could address how superintendents are prepared to handle twenty-first century challenges. With the current focus on meeting licensure requirements (Shelton, 2010), researching how superintendents are being prepared to understand and address challenges ranging from equitable funding for school, minoritized populations of students, special education, and mental health is lacking. While examining current structures, research could also involve investigate relevant missing pieces not included in the curriculum and their impact on the role. Kowalski, Peterson, and Fusarelli's (2009) survey participants mention curricula's omitted or missing courses such as: school finance, school law, school board relations, politics of education, and collective bargaining.
- Continue to explore internships and their use in preparation for educational leaders and superintendents. Despite their widespread use, research has been neglected in this area and offers limited assessments regarding the impact of internships (Young et al., 2013). Much of the criticism of internships include low

quality faculty, weak connections between curriculum and practice, low admission standards, and menial tasks performed by interns as they passively log their hours until completion (Dishman & Redish, 2011; Fry et al., 2007; Gray et al., 2007; Levine, 2005).

- This study focused on preparation of superintendents moving into the role; an abundance of research exists related to superintendents exiting the position but exploring the reason for leaving the field remains scarce (Peterson et al., 2008). Grissom (2012) attempted to identify factors contributing to superintendent turnover but relied only on hand-collected newspaper articles. Exploring the topic of superintendent turnover is important, as the current average retention rate is between three and four years.
- Another area for future research is the impact superintendents have on the districts in which they serve. Teacher and building administrator impact are noted in literature, but superintendent impact is insufficient. Marzano and Waters (2006) contended superintendent longevity has a positive effect on student achievement, but limited research suggests successful execution of central management functions, such as staff recruitment, financial management, leadership of instruction, and strategic planning for creating positive learning environments within schools, which may indirectly impact student achievement (Alsbury, 2008a; Byrd et al., 2006; Petersen, 2002).
- Due to the significance of experiences co-researchers identified while in central office positions, further research could focus on specific career experiences and exploring the significance of the position to the superintendent role. Due to the

wide variance of position titles and responsibilities at the central office level positions, this could include associate superintendents, deputy superintendents, and assistant superintendents. Those with the titles of director, coordinator, consultant, or manager are considered outside of the line hierarchy because they might not hold the required administrative credentials (Kim & Brunner, 2009).

- Continue to examine mentors and explore more the mentor and mentee structure for educational leaders. Through their career pathway, superintendents began as teacher leaders, aspiring to be building level administrators. In the beginning, participating in teacher mentor programs allowed an increase in their confidence, knowledge, and instruction, student achievement, and teacher retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Kapadia & Coca, 2007; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Stanulis et al., 2012). Examining how educational leaders were mentored and how leadership capacity was built within would be beneficial to the role. Currently, only 20 states require some form of professional support for all new school principals in their first year, and only six states require new principals to continue support into a second year. Fourteen states require principals to complete a mentor program to meet school administrator licensure requirements (Goldrick, 2016).
- Continue to study mentor and mentee relationships for educational leaders. Thessin, Clayton, and Jamison (2018) highlighted the characteristics in the development of the communication structure, style of communication, and trust that manifest as critical components of an effective mentoring relationship. Exploring this relationship and the impact on both the mentee and mentor would

further inform mentor programs and increase their success in preparing educational leaders.

- There is currently a very limited body of research pertaining to charter school superintendents and non-traditional superintendents. Research could be conducted for both related to career pathways and preparation for the position. Likewise, the impact and success for each could be reviewed. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) asserted charter schools enroll more students who are at risk for dropout and eligible for free and reduced lunch than public schools, and, as such, require more supports and interventions. This requires that charter school superintendents be well equipped to handle the complex demands and responsibilities of the position and to have a positive impact on students.
- Lastly, a theme uncovered for both female co-researchers was *intrinsic drive*, which was not echoed by any of the male co-researchers. Future research could focus on why female participants regularly mentioned a drive to accomplish, do more, and obtain a higher status. These comments and experiences were rarely made by male co-researchers, if at all.

Conclusion

Overall, this study addressed the problem of school superintendents not being adequately prepared as high-quality candidates to assume the roles and responsibilities required of the position. Using transcendental phenomenology, co-researcher experiences were viewed through the lens of social constructionism and curriculum theory. While each co-researcher brought their own varied experiences along the pathway to the

superintendency, together they constructed the meaning of their feelings of preparedness for the position. From career experiences, different positions provided them options to develop and hone their leadership skills and develop their understanding of the work superintendents do daily. Higher education experiences provided opportunities for co-researchers to continue to grow in their education, gain knowledge from coursework, and acquire skills for addressing challenging obstacles. Lastly, mentors played pivotal roles throughout their entire careers as they relied on strong relationships and their informal networks to tackle problems and be successful.

Final Reflections

Throughout this study, co-researchers shared their experiences regarding their preparation for their position as superintendent. Each co-researcher gave credit and recognized the importance of their preparation that stemmed from their professional experiences, higher education experiences, and mentor experiences along the way. As this study comes to a conclusion, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my journey from start to finish.

This dissertation study has been the longest and hardest academic work of my life. I have learned much through the process in regard to understanding how to conduct valid and ethical research. This strong foundation has allowed me to grow as a researcher and has prepared me with the knowledge to evaluate and understand another researchers' work. This process has also led to understanding my own abilities. When presented with a monumental task, I now have the perseverance and grit to overcome the challenge. Reflecting on the journey and learning along the way, I would make a few changes to the study.

One change would be prolonging the study over a longer period of time, allowing multiple times to meet with co-researchers for interviews. Due to the demands of the superintendent position, it was difficult for superintendent co-researchers to meet multiple times at the end of the school year, when this study was conducted. However, the multiple data of documents and observations contributed to the meaning of the in-depth interviews. Continuing this study over a longer period of time, perhaps an entire year, would support a deeper meaning of the phenomena of preparation, allowing experiences to be explored more deeply. Likewise, narrowing the focus to specific areas of preparation would allow for more detailed information of experiences to come forth.

Utilizing transcendental phenomenology was the most appropriate qualitative tradition for this study. Another change to the study would be to combine transcendental phenomenology with a quantitative survey tool to gather information related to measures of perceptions of preparation, creating a mixed methods study. Survey data could include demographic data and using rating scales to determine or highlight participants' feelings toward different preparation experiences, giving more direction to interviews.

Along this learning journey, I have changed greatly from my examination of literature and empirical research conducted in regard to educational leadership and curriculum and instruction. Coupled with the information gleaned from co-researchers, I have gained a better understanding of how to be prepared as an effective leader. Learning from other leaders' experiences, each providing an insight into their lives, has allowed me to understand how to take advantage of opportunities, which will be beneficial for me as I aspire to one day assume the position of superintendent.

APPENDIX A

INVITATIONAL EMAIL

Dear _____,

My name is Jeremy Montague. I am currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and am in the process of writing my dissertation. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study entitled, *Superintendent Preparation: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study*. (*Title was changed after data were collected and analyzed).

The purpose of the research is to examine how superintendents are prepared to handle the complex responsibilities and demands of the position.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. There are no known risks to participation beyond those encountered in everyday life. Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous; no identifiable information will be collected. Data from this research will be password protected and reported only as a collective combined total.

If you have any questions about this project, feel free to contact me at jjm2pc@umkc.mail.edu. Also, you may contact my research adviser, Dr. Loyce Caruthers at caruthersl@umkc.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Montague

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTION HANDOUT

Main research question:

How do superintendents perceive and describe their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

Higher Education

RSQ - In what ways do they describe the role of higher education programs in their preparation for superintendent?

1. What higher education institutions have you attended and what were your degree focuses at each?
2. Was there a specific reason why you choose the institutions that you did?
3. How were your areas of emphasis determined for each of your degrees?
4. How did you determine your dissertation focus and how does it apply to your job now?
5. Are there any experiences that you found valuable or that you remember that you feel have prepared you for your current position?

Professional Experiences

RSQ - What meanings do they communicate about the role of professional experiences in their preparation for superintendent?

1. Please tell me about the different positions you have had in your career leading up to the superintendency.
2. What initial experiences prompted you to move into a leadership position?
3. What experience as a building leader do you feel like prepared you for the superintendency?
4. What experiences as central office leader do you feel like prepared you for the superintendency?
5. Overall, which position did you feel best prepared you for your current position and why?

Mentoring

RSQ - How do they experience the role of mentoring in their preparation for superintendent?

1. Please tell me about your mentors and their role on your path to the superintendency.
2. How were mentors chosen or selected in your experience?
3. What qualities or characteristics did your mentor(s) possess that you feel helped prepare you?
4. How have informal mentors or those mentors not specifically assigned to you play a role in your preparation leading up to your superintendency?
5. As a superintendent, do you currently or have you had a mentor? How have they helped you in your current role?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview Guide 1

Overall Research question:

How do new superintendents perceive and describe their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

<prefatory statement>

Higher Education

RSQ - In what ways do they describe the role of higher education programs in their preparation for superintendent?

1. What higher education institutions have you attended and what were your degree focuses at each?

<summarize transition>

2. Was there a specific reason why you choose the institutions that you did?

<summarize transition>

3. How were your areas of emphasis determined for each of your degrees?

<summarize transition>

4. How did you determine your dissertation focus and how does it apply to your job now?

<summarize transition>

5. Are there any experiences that you found valuable or that you remember that you feel have prepared you for your current position?

<summarize transition>

6. Is there anything else you would like to add or mention?

<closing>

Interview Guide 2

Overall Research question:

How do new superintendents perceive and describe their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

<prefatory statement>

Professional Experiences

RSQ - What meanings do they communicate about the role of professional experiences in their preparation for superintendent?

1. Please tell me about the different positions you have had in your career leading up to the superintendency.

<summarize transition>

2. What initial experiences prompted you to move into a leadership position?

<summarize transition>

3. What experience as a building leader do you feel like prepared you for the superintendency?

<summarize transition>

4. What experiences as central office leader do you feel like prepared you for the superintendency?

<summarize transition>

5. Overall, which position did you feel best prepared you for your current position and why?

<summarize transition>

6. Is there anything else you would like to add or mention?

<closing>

Interview Guide 3

Overall Research question:

How do new superintendents perceive and describe their preparation experiences before assuming the role of superintendent?

<prefatory statement>

Mentoring

RSQ - How do they experience the role of mentoring in their preparation for superintendent?

1. Please tell me about your mentors and their role on your path to the superintendency.

<summarize transition>

2. How were mentors chosen or selected in your experience?

<summarize transition>

3. What qualities or characteristics did your mentor(s) possess that you feel helped prepare you?

<summarize transition>

4. How have informal mentors or those mentors not specifically assigned to you play a role in your preparation leading up to your superintendency?

<summarize transition>

5. As a superintendent, do you currently or have you had a mentor? How have they helped you in your current role?

<summarize transition>

6. Is there anything else you would like to add or mention?

<closing>

APPENDIX D
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Participant Pseudo Name:

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Location:

<Insert Address>

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
Activities	Questions to Self: Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior: My interpretations:
Climate	Questions to Self: Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior: My interpretations:
Interactions of Participant with Parent(s)	Questions to Self: Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior: My interpretations:
Interactions of Participant with Staff	Questions to Self: Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior: My interpretations:
Public Speaking	Questions to Self: Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior: My interpretations:

<p>Participants comments: Expressed in quotes</p>	<p>Questions to Self:</p> <p>Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior:</p> <p>My interpretations:</p>
<p>Nonverbal communications</p>	<p>Questions to Self:</p> <p>Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior:</p> <p>My interpretations:</p>
<p>Other relevant observations</p>	<p>Questions to Self:</p> <p>Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior:</p> <p>My interpretations:</p>
<p>Unplanned events</p>	<p>Questions to Self:</p> <p>Ob. Of Nonverbal Behavior:</p> <p>My interpretations:</p>

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VITA

Jeremy Joseph Montague was born on September 13, 1988 in Kansas City, Missouri. He was educated in the local public schools and graduated from Oak Park High School in 2007. He received a vocal music scholarship to Central Methodist University in Fayette, Missouri, from which he graduated in 2011 with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education.

After working for two years in the public schools, he began a master's program in educational administration at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He was awarded his Master of Arts degree in May 2014. He returned to begin an educational specialist program in district level leadership and graduated in May 2016.

In 2016, Mr. Montague assumed an assistant principal position at Golden Oaks Education Center in North Kansas City, Missouri. During his time there, he was awarded the Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals Clay-Platte Region Assistant Principal of the Year. He began work toward his interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Fall of 2016 at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Upon completion of his degree requirements, Mr. Montague plans to continue his career in elementary education and pursue research interests. He hopes one day to obtain the position of superintendent to positively impact the lives of a greater number of students and prepare them for an ever-evolving world.