

Gender Disproportionality in K-12 School Superintendent Positions

BY

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ABSTRACT

Despite an increase in the number of women obtaining senior leadership positions, women continue to be underrepresented in school district superintendencies (Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley, 2014; T. Wallace, 2015). In contrast to the number of women in the teaching force, as compared to their male counterparts, fewer women obtain senior positions, leaving the role of the K-12 superintendent male-dominated (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2016; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011; Searby, Ballenger, & Tripses, 2015). This ongoing and unresolved issue of gender disproportionality was explored using an exploratory multiple case study. The purpose of this research was to identify internal and external gender barriers and to explore the issue through the lenses of feminist and social capital theories. This study is significant because it will support aspiring women leaders, fill gaps in the research, and broaden the knowledge about gender disproportionality in leadership. The data revealed answers to the research questions about how women superintendents have experienced gender disproportionality, the effects of this lack of gender proportion, factors women attributed to gender disproportionality, and similarities or differences experienced within the two cases. Fourteen of the 19 women who are currently serving as superintendents in two Canadian provinces participated in the study. One-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analyses completed the data gathering process. As the data analysis unfolded, the creation of themes led to five recommendations for addressing the issue of gender disproportionality in the K-12 school superintendent role.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Despite a modest increase in the number of women in senior leadership positions, researchers have found that gender parity has still not been reached and that women remain underrepresented in many industries and in numerous professions, including that of the K-12 school superintendent (Heslinga, 2013; Lumby, 2013). On the global scale, Lumby's (2013) research study related to gender inequalities in educational leadership indicated that cultural understandings are not in alignment with western enlightenment. Heslinga (2013) concurred with these findings when she described the need for additional research following her three-year qualitative research study which garnered personal stories from educational leaders in China and the U.S. Heslinga (2013) also discovered that gender disproportionality is a worldwide phenomenon and she suggested that women must continue to seek a balance between their personal and professional lives.

Even though the worldwide teaching force is predominantly female, the issue of gender disproportionality in the top school district leadership position is evident and male-dominated (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Sampson, Gresham, Applewhite, & Roberts, 2015; T. Wallace, 2015). Burton and Weiner (2016), in their U.S. case study analysis on influences of gender, found that women are underrepresented in educational leadership positions, and even when leadership preparation programs are in place, these programs are often missing components of gender identity, leading to disproportionality and the promotion of male stereotypes. Similar findings from Wallace's (2015) survey data revealed that gender bias continues to exist in the K-12 educational leadership environment, and these same results were revealed from Sampson et al.'s (2015) study related to the disproportionality of women being promoted to senior positions. This issue

of disproportionality, or the underrepresentation of women in school district leadership roles, creates an imbalance of power and one that impacts women's opportunities for leadership success (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Sampson et al., 2015; T. Wallace, 2015). Using an explanatory, multiple case study within two Canadian provinces, this research was designed to explore the experiences women superintendents face in two provinces around the subject of gender disproportionality.

Study Background/Foundation

The role of the superintendent is multi-dimensional. Even though the role has expanded and evolved over time, researchers in the field of K-12 leadership have found that, more than ever before, superintendents must be skilled and effective teacher-scholars, efficient managers, democratic leaders, applied social scientists, and capable communicators (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014; Muñoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley, 2014; T. Wallace, 2015). While there is a lack of evidence to support men as being more adept at these roles, the research on disproportionality in superintendent positions has revealed that males continue to dominate the landscape (Sampson et al., 2015).

The issue of gender disproportion or the lack of a balanced representation between the general and educator populations – relative to what is discovered in the superintendent role – becomes even more evident when examining the numbers of women in teaching positions. Burton and Weiner (2016) have found that while 86% of the teaching population is female, only 33% of the superintendent level is female. While shifts are occurring and some women are attaining these leadership positions, the total number of women who are serving in superintendent positions has been found to be low,

leaving the issue of disproportionality unresolved (Burkman & Lester, 2013; Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015; Muñoz et al., 2014; T. Wallace, 2015). Texas-based studies by Burkman and Lester (2013), Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015), and Muñoz et al. (2014) confirmed these findings when they discovered the disproportional number of female to male superintendent. The results from these studies also revealed that there are a number of barriers to achieving equitable numbers and success in these roles.

By examining the barriers to success for aspiring female leaders, researchers continue to determine why this issue of gender disproportionality persists and what can be done to bring about proportionality (Burkman & Lester, 2013; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015; Mahboubeh, Alizadeh, & Esmaeeli, 2015; Muñoz et al., 2014; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). As an example, results of a study by Mahboubeh et al. (2015) supported not only what these and other authors stated about the lack of gender proportionality, but added that to support the female half of the population, society must be reformed.

Numerous scholars have suggested that the barriers women face when attempting to secure a superintendent position encompass a lack of human capital investment, show individual and organizational prejudices, and are a noted deficiency in organizational reform policies and practices (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Diehl, 2014; Rhode, 2017; T. Wallace, 2015). While Derrington and Sharratt (2009) found that barriers were seen as insurmountable, others have promoted taking action and suggested recommendations to implement (Diehl, 2014; Rhode, 2017; T. Wallace, 2015). The research from this dissertation offers insight into the possible causes for disproportionality, solutions to noted barriers, and provides information on potential solutions to the identified problem.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Even though research into the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions has been widely studied, the literature on K-12 superintendencies in Canada and the reasons for the noted disproportionality remains limited. Canadian researchers, Kachur-Reico and Wallin (2011) confirmed the problem of gender disproportionality in K-12 school superintendents; yet, Brandon et al. (2013), following a three-year research study of superintendent induction programs in Alberta, noted that there is limited value in leadership induction programs. Little reference was discovered on how the identification of gender barriers leads to a change in the disproportionality of women and men in the senior leadership role. To provide suggestions for change and actions that can be acted upon were found to be still in the infancy stages. Further details surrounding the presenting issue and the findings from the literature are noted in Chapter 2.

Problem Statement

The problem of gender disproportionality in educational leadership is often studied yet, this issue remains unresolved. As noted earlier, U.S.-based research has shown that while 86% of teachers are women, only 33% of educators at the superintendent level are women (Burton & Weiner, 2016). The general problem addressed in this study is that the noted gender disproportionality in leadership roles, particularly in the role of the K-12 superintendent, does not represent the general or educator populations.

Similar to the U.S. statistics cited earlier, Canadian school districts follow a comparable pattern of disproportionality. For example, in Alberta, women hold only 20% of the 74 superintendencies, and in Saskatchewan, only 18% or five of the 28 school

district superintendent positions are occupied by females (Cooke, 2016; Litun, 2016). These statistics reveal a local problem similar to the larger general problem presented above and therefore lead to the specific problem, the lack of proportional representation of men and women in Canadian school superintendent positions.

Research studies conducted in other countries have also found that the lack of gendered proportionality is an ethical and societal issue (Rashid, 2010; Schuh et al., 2014). Rashid's (2010) study of nine women in Pakistan revealed that barriers continue to exist for women seeking senior leadership positions. Schuh et al. (2014), based on their German-based quantitative study of women in leadership positions, also found that the underrepresentation of women in top roles poses an ethical challenge to society. In the United States, J. W. Cook's (2012) qualitative study into ethical leadership found that ethical leadership and being an ethical role model are necessary for achieving positive ethical and societal norms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how current K-12 superintendents in two Canadian provinces have experienced the issue of gender disproportionality in top educational leadership roles. By obtaining these firsthand experiences and insights from female participants, other women aspiring to superintendent roles may be advantaged, gaps in the research filled, and the field of knowledge about educational leadership and gender disproportionality broadened.

In addition to the aforementioned purpose of this explanatory, multiple case study, value may be found for women who wish to learn from the experiences of women who have secured a superintendency. The results and subsequent recommendations

presented in Chapters 4 and 5 provide support to female leadership candidates, while also giving credibility to school district personnel who wish to establish new policies and practices.

Methodology Overview

The methodology for this research was the explanatory, multiple case study approach. This approach allows for (a) an examination of the noted phenomenon or contemporary event, (b) a comparison of the two selected cases or bounded systems, and finally (c) the completion of an in-depth analysis of the situation or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016; Yin, 2014).

To gather data for this examination, comparison, and analysis using a multiple case study approach, female superintendents in two Canadian provinces were asked to participate. Relative to what has been previously identified about the disproportional representation of women in school district superintendencies, the actual percentage of female superintendents in each of the two selected provinces is 20%. Within this study, while all female superintendents were asked to participate, at least 60%, or a total of 11 female superintendents, was required for completion of this research. While there is no pre-established number or percentage of participants who should be included in a case study, researchers have indicated that saturation must be reached (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016; Yin, 2014). Saturation is reached when the data are redundant, the same responses are being heard repeatedly, and no further insights are being presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Saturation was reached with a 70% participation rate and the resultant data, obtained from current female superintendents, was primarily gathered through semi-

structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are important because they allow for flexibility, include both structured and less structured questions, permit individual and specific data from each respondent, and the interviews then guide the issues presented and explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As described by Wahyuni (2012), the follow-up and extended questioning allowed for any queries that related to specific themes or ideas presented by any of the interviewees. To complement the individual interviews, two focus groups were assembled over the phone. These focus groups, Mertler (2016) noted, should include no more than 10 participants and last approximately 30 minutes in length.

In addition to the interviews and focus group conversations, qualitative methodologists have noted that other data sources to examine may include records, journals, observations, and artifacts (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016; Yin, 2014). For this study, an examination of school board policies, procedures, and job advertisements related to the superintendency and school board hiring practices were examined. As multiple data sources were accessed, it was found that one of the benefits of using these multiple sources is the opportunity to triangulate the evidence and establish trustworthiness. This procedure, as identified by Mertler (2016) and Yin (2014) was selected. When comparing the two units or cases of analysis, the examination of documents also provided a more comprehensive understanding of the setting, and subsequently, how individuals were impacted by the identified setting (Patton, 2015). As described by Yin (2014), while interviews allowed for targeted and insightful data to be collected, document analysis provided the opportunity to continuously review the data and further build a foundation for comparison.

As the data were gathered and each interview completed, analysis began. A constant comparative technique was used throughout the coding process. This process was used to first develop conceptual categories and then to create themes. These categories and themes were created from the initial line-by-line and focused coding strategies. Finally, as the data analysis unfolded, an explanation, which fits for both cases, was created. This explanation, created from the data analysis, is further discussed in Chapter 4.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed based on what was discovered in the research and indicative of a world-wide problem. These research questions were also developed in consultation with the Dissertation Chair and guided the study:

1. How do female superintendents experience gender disproportionality in two Canadian provinces?
2. What effect, if any, does gender disproportionality have on the female superintendents in these two provinces?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of disproportionality between the female superintendents in these two provinces?
4. What factors do the female superintendents attribute to gender disproportionality in their provinces?

Study Limitations

While it was expected that an ample number of participants would agree to participate in this study, it was possible that a lower number of respondents may have chosen to contribute. Two case studies—each case representing one Canadian province

and the women superintendents currently employed as superintendents—were analyzed in this research. While the goal was to obtain data from the possible 19 participants, it was determined that, of these 19 women, at least 60% of the female superintendent population was required for the study. While no specific number of participants has been clearly established for case study research, saturation must be reached (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016; Yin, 2014). If this limitation would have arisen and saturation not reached, a third Canadian province would have been added to the study.

A second limitation may have been different ways that the school systems conceptualize the role of the superintendent or director. Adding to this limitation was the possibility that, based on the total number of school districts in each province, the experiences of the women in the two cases may have been different. If either of these situations were to have been discovered, further data analysis and comparisons would have been conducted.

A final limitation may have been the possibility of perceived bias. This may have been observed because of past experiences in the role of a teacher, school principal, and director/superintendent. To reduce this potential limitation, suspending judgment through the use of bracketing, as outlined by Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), was achieved.

Definition of Key Terms

Director. In the province of Saskatchewan, the Director of Education is the CEO of the school jurisdiction. According to the revised Education Act (2015) for Saskatchewan, the Director has executive responsibilities to prepare and submit reports to

the Minister of Education, manage and supervise schools and personnel, provide educational leadership, and act as the link between the elected board of education, the district staff, and the community. Within this study, this term is replaced with the term *superintendent*.

Disparity and disproportionality. Disparity and disproportionality are used interchangeably to describe a phenomenon in which one portion of a population is either underrepresented or overrepresented (Bryan, Day-Vries, Griffin, & Moore-Thomäs, 2012). This study focuses on gender disproportionality or disparity in K-12 superintendencies.

K-12 education. K-12 refers to education from kindergarten through Grade 12. Within this study, K-12 school districts employ a school superintendent to oversee all educational services within a geographic area.

Leadership. Leadership is a relational practice that allows for team and organizational goals to be achieved (Blackmore, 2010). Within this study, the word leadership is used to describe the role of the school superintendent as educational leader.

School board. A school board is an elected group of individuals; the collective group's job is to oversee the fiduciary and governance operations of the school district (Alberta School Act, 2015; Education Act, 2015). In this study, the school board is the employing body for the superintendent.

School district. Also referred to as school jurisdiction or school division, this term refers to a specified area of the province as defined by the government. Each school district is responsible for schools and the delivery of education in that geographical area (Alberta School Act, 2015; Education Act, 2015). As each school district also employs a

superintendent, this term was used in connection with each of the study participants and their work location.

Superintendency. The school superintendency is described as the complex and political office held by the senior educational leader in a K-12 school district (Ellerson, 2016; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; T. Wallace, 2015).

Superintendent. In several Canadian provinces, the term superintendent is used interchangeably with the superintendent of schools. This individual is hired by the elected Board of Trustees and is responsible for not only managing and supervising schools and school personnel, but also for providing educational leadership (Alberta School Act, 2015; Education Act, 2015). The superintendent acts as liaison between the Board of Trustees, the staff, and the community (Alberta School Act, 2015). The term superintendent is used within a number of Canadian provinces. For the purposes of this study, the terms director and superintendent are used synonymously. The distinction is only used locally and at the provincial level.

Chapter Summary

This research study addressed the issue of gender disproportionality in the K-12 school superintendent environment. Using an explanatory, multiple case study approach, data were gathered by interviewing current female superintendents within two Canadian provinces. While at least 60% of the possible female superintendents within each of these two provinces were expected to be interviewed, and all female superintendents were asked to participate, the actual percentage of respondents was 70% of the total female superintendent population. Supplementary data, including written documentation pertinent to the research questions and important to the presenting issue, were examined.

The findings from this study were analyzed through a constant comparative analysis of the two cases. Through this process, similarities were drawn, and if differences had been discovered, they would have been noted. To provide further justification for this dissertation, Chapter 2 describes the literature in the field of gender disproportionality, identifies discrepancies in previous findings, and uncovers gaps in the current literature.

The chapters that follow provide further details of the research study. Chapter 3 describes the explanatory multiple case study methodology employed, identifies possible limitations, and provides the foundation for the final two chapters. Chapter 4 identifies the findings of the two case studies, and in Chapter 5, conclusions and recommendations are shared in response to the research questions.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research in this dissertation uncovers possible reasons for the disproportionality of men and women in superintendent roles in two Canadian provinces. The four research questions that guided this study were offered to not only justify further investigation, but to identify possible reasons for the disproportionality of women in K-12 leadership. This literature review begins with a general background on the issue of gender disproportionality in education. Then moves into a discussion of disproportionality in senior leadership positions, the specific nature of the population, how a woman's leadership effectiveness is perceived, and barriers faced by women, are included in this section.

The final part of the literature review describes two theoretical frameworks. Following an overview of both feminist and social capital theories, the basic principles were identified and criticisms recognized. Through the lens of each theory, research studies into leadership and specifically gender-related educational leadership were identified. In summary, this review provides further justification for the research study and combined with the results, it makes available the rationalization for gender equity within school districts and more specifically, provides rationale for a move to gender proportionality within the superintendency.

Disproportionality in Education

Disproportionality is described as a phenomenon in which one portion of a population is either underrepresented or overrepresented (Bryan et al., 2012). While research into disproportionality is often associated with race, special education, and criminal activity, researchers suggested that gender is also noted in studies of

disproportionality and disparity (Bryan et al., 2012; Muñoz et al., 2014; Sampson et al., 2015). In a qualitative study, in which they interviewed 26 women from academic leadership positions Diehl and Dubinsky (2016) concluded that there are 27 barriers impacting a woman's rise to the top. They also found that while there has been an increase in the number of women in senior educational leadership positions, females remain underrepresented in these top roles. This disparity and barriers affecting women are also evident in the male-dominated leadership environment found in K-12 educational systems according to several other studies that specifically focused on K-12 leadership (Burkman & Lester, 2013; Carr, 2012; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; T. Wallace, 2015).

The research Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) conducted is part of a growing body of research which finds that even though the issue of gender disproportionality in educational leadership is often noted, the issue remains unresolved. Unequal representation of women in leadership continues to compromise equal opportunity, social justice, and proportional representation of both the general and educator populations (Heslinga, 2013; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Lumby, 2013; Nanton, 2015; Rhode, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Schuh et al., 2014). To provide further clarity, in addition to the term of disproportionality, numerous authors include disparity and inequity when describing this phenomenon (Schuh et al., 2014).

In a survey of school districts within the United States, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA, 2016) found that the number of women superintendents is approximately 1:3. While 86% of teachers are women, only 33% of the superintendent level positions are held by women (Burton & Weiner, 2016). This statistic highlights the general problem of gender disproportionality in leadership roles,

particularly those of superintendents in K-12 education; the demonstrated lack of proportionality does not represent the total population. While most of the research into gender disproportionality at the superintendent level has been found to be conducted in the United States, Canadian school districts also follow an equivalent pattern of disproportionality. This pattern is illustrated in two Canadian provinces, for example, Alberta school district results show disparity with only 20% of superintendent leadership positions held by women (Litun, 2016), and in Saskatchewan only 18% of the 28 school district CEO positions are occupied by females (Cooke, 2016). These statistics reveal a local problem similar to the larger general problem presented above. This study was designed to add to this Canadian research and examine the gender disproportionality found by examining the experiences of female superintendents.

Disproportionality in the K-12 setting is demonstrated by more men being in leadership positions over a teacher population that is mostly women. A review of the current literature on gender disproportionality revealed two concerns. The first concern, identified causes or barriers that led to the lack of proportionality when females, regardless of the industry, are aspiring to top leadership roles (Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz, 2015; Duevel, Nashman-Smith, & Stern, 2015; Elliott, Leck, Rockwell, and Luthy, 2013; Kagoda, 2016; Kenschaft et al., 2016; Nanton, 2015; Rhode, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Sui Chu Ho, 2016). Research has shown that there are many reasons: gender barriers, including recruitment and hiring practices, institutional bias, discrimination, and family responsibilities, that are found to favor male leadership candidates. Even though some research shows that more women are beginning to achieve top leadership positions, education is still a male-dominated leadership field (Munoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley,

2014; Robinson, 2016; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Sampson et al., 2015; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; Sui Chu Ho, 2016; T. Wallace, 2015).

Sampson et al. (2015) researched the promotion of women to central office positions and through their exploratory research study, found that most superintendents are male. Sperandio and Devdas (2015) confirmed these findings in their study regarding the perceptions of female superintendents related to the job of superintendent and lifestyle choices. Results once again showed that men occupy most K-12 superintendencies in Pennsylvania and common barriers do exist (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Using a mixed methods research design regarding career aspiration of central office administrators, Muñoz et al. (2014) also discovered that women occupy fewer superintendencies than men and that the reasons may often be as a result of personal choice. Throughout a review of the current literature, it was found that these researchers examined how women may have difficulty advancing to leadership positions around the world. The low number of women in K-12 superintendencies worldwide was found to be consistent with the problem proposed at the onset of this study.

The second concern, which arises from the literature, is related to the research of Schuh et al. (2014). Findings from Schuh et al.'s (2014) four research studies related to power and gender differences led them to conclude that power motivation is different for men and women, adding that the promotion of the unequal distribution of men and women in leadership roles is prevalent. These findings identified gender disproportionality as an ethical issue that impacts society.

The research related to this second concern identified four antecedents of potential ethical challenges to society: (a) the influences of past and future modeling and

mentoring; (b) the ability to create trusting and respectful relationships; (c) the motivation for power; and (d) gendered assumptions (M. E. Brown & Treviño, 2014; Cohen, 2013; J. W. Cook 2012; Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013; Rhode, 2017; Ridgeway, 2014; Schuh et al., 2014). Pastoriza and Ariño's (2013) examination of social capital and ethical leadership revealed that ethical role models impact how individuals grow and become ethical citizens. Brown and Treviño (2014) concurred with these findings when the results their quantitative research study found that ethical role models are important for both organizations and society. Transferring this concept into the educational field, an earlier study by J. W. Cook (2012) found that ethical principles, which are practiced in school leadership, are desirable for both children and adults. Based on their studies, researchers have concluded that if sustainable action is not taken, each of these precursors to ethical challenges will further reinforce the unequal distribution of men and women in senior leadership positions (M. E. Brown & Treviño, 2014; Cohen, 2013; Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014, Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013, Rhode, 2017; Schuh et al., 2014).

The research has also shown that as ethical issues have been developed and perpetuated, these same issues are demonstrated within society. Shah and Shah (2012), based on a study of educational leaders in Pakistan, indicated that access to leadership positions is contingent upon cultural norms and beliefs. These authors also indicated that within every society, a multitude of complex cultural factors interact; these cultural differences and biases both impact and are impacted by the role to which a woman is assigned (Shah & Shah, 2012). Support for these findings was found in a review of Ridgeway's (2014) own U.S.-based research article when she noted that cultural beliefs

impact all social interactions and that those inequities, based on difference and social status, are discovered in everyday situations.

In the multi-faceted environment of school districts, it is implied that societal expectations and leading ethically become intertwined in daily interactions and relationships (Kenschaft et al., 2016). Using a comparative approach to gender equality Kenschaft et al. examined both the causes and consequences of gender inequality. Throughout their book, the authors noted that as educational institutions play an important role in socializing future leaders, the perpetuation of the societal acceptance of male-dominant leadership, keeps power from women (Kenschaft et al., 2016). Lemasters and Roach (2012), in their prior research into women in the superintendency, also identified barriers women face followed by recommendations to support women in their leadership goals. Overall, researchers have concluded that for educational institutions to positively impact belief systems about women as leaders, school systems need to understand, teach, and model proportionality (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Wallace, 2015).

Disproportionality in K-12 Leadership

Gender disproportionality within the leadership realm is found in unequal positions of power, an imbalance in career enhancement opportunities, and potential barriers to career movement (Elliott et al., 2013). Findings from Elliott et al.'s (2013) study of 210 Canadian and U.S. participants revealed that the continuing imbalance of men and women in senior leadership roles remains status quo. T. Wallace (2015) confirmed Elliott et al.'s (2013) findings, adding that aspiring female superintendents also need to learn to navigate the system.

Role of School Boards and the K-12 School Superintendent

An important part of learning to navigate the system is to be clear on the role of school boards and, subsequently, the superintendent. The existence of school boards can be traced back to the late 1700s. At this time, town hall meetings provided guidance to schools (Björk et al., 2014; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2014). By the 1830s, the first assigned school superintendent position was established; school boards were therefore required to give up some of their power and control (Björk et al., 2014; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2014). Marzano and Waters (2009), described that superintendents were then expected to manage the schools and provide teaching expertise; school boards, on the other hand, moved to the role of policy setting and overall governance.

Superintendents are hired into the top leadership position within a defined geographic area, referred to as a *school district*. Boyland (2013) in her five state study into principals' perceptions of the K-12 superintendency, discovered that school districts need to implement practices that provide support for those who may be interested in top leadership positions. Isernhagen and Bulkin (2013) furthered these findings when they studied the challenges and successes of two female superintendents in their first years. Results showed that once in the top position, the superintendent must not only have the ability, but also learn how to work efficiently with their district school boards.

T. Wallace (2015) expanded on this conclusion by indicating that the superintendent role is multifaceted. The superintendent of today is required to have skills in budgeting and financial preparation, policy implementation, personnel policies and hiring practices, collective bargaining, strategic planning, effective communication, and

instructional leadership (T. Wallace, 2015). Björk et al. (2014), following their research into educational reform and state legislation, also posited that superintendents must be scholars and teachers, skilled communicators and managers, democratic-political leaders, and sound decision makers in constantly changing and challenging contexts. In current times of change, these responsibilities are also confounded with decreased funding, increased accountability, excessive bureaucracy, mounting parental concerns, and increased student safety issues (Björk et al., 2014).

Björk et al. (2014) and Thompson (2014) found that these social, political, and economic conditions affect how the superintendent is able to work within the confines of externally imposed boundaries. Thompson's (2014) quantitative study of school board presidents and superintendents found that when it came to working relationships, the perceptions of the two groups were different. Inconsistent actions, values, and public disagreements showed up in both their communications strategies and group dynamics. Other researchers studying women in education have concurred with these aforementioned findings suggesting that to transcend these boundaries, individuals must be aware that expectations and gendered expectations continue to pressure society and institutions (Addi-Racah, 2015; Björk et al., 2014; Shah, 2016; Shakeshaft, 2016). In consideration of these identified pressures, the issue of disproportionality is seen to be both self-imposed and externally influenced; still, as Muñoz et al. (2014) and Boyland (2013) discovered from their studies, further research into the reasons or causes of gender disproportionality in educational leadership needs to be pursued.

Effectiveness of the Leader

Gender disproportionality, as noted earlier, continues to be an issue for superintendents in K-12 school districts. Much of the current research has shown that as a woman begins to ascend to this top position, her effectiveness is carefully scrutinized and she is often judged more harshly than her male counterparts (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016; J. D. Nichols & Nichols, 2014; Schuh et al., 2014). In Kaiser and Wallace's (2016) study of an equal number of men and women in upper-level leadership roles, they too found that biases against women remain intact. Transferring these findings into education, the results of J. D. Nichols and Nichols (2014) study of school leadership and climate found that a woman's effectiveness in leadership positions is still hampered through stereotypes and gender biases.

Yet, not all researchers have found these same results. In contrast to the previously noted negative responses about a woman's leadership effectiveness, an earlier U.S. study by Burns and Martin (2010) discovered that the perceptions individuals have of the leader, are not founded on gender. The differing opinions and responses from the literature, therefore, indicate a lack of clarity on the issue of perceived leadership effectiveness as it relates to gender and gender disproportionality.

Adding to the issue about the gender of a leader and her effectiveness in K-12 system leadership is the concern about ethical behavior. Adding to the research previously noted, Schuh et al. (2014) suggested that the disproportionality of women in senior leadership positions is an ethical dilemma and one that is directly linked to effectiveness. Consequently, as school leaders impact others within the educational environment, their ethical behavior is essential to both the school and the leader's

effectiveness (J. W. Cook, 2012). In turn, since researchers and other scholars have also found that ethical leadership is viewed as leading by example, it is important that leaders demonstrate appropriate behavior in an effort to achieve more positive perceptions about their effectiveness (M. E. Brown & Treviño, 2014; Crawford, 2014; Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013). In support of the need for women to be seen as effective leaders, potential barriers related to their effectiveness and leadership prowess may be questioned.

Barriers Leading to Disproportionality

Leadership researchers have found that even with modest growth in the gendered leadership balance, there continue to be barriers women face when ascending to top jobs (Blackmore, 2010; Burkman & Lester, 2013; Burton & Weiner, 2016; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Crites et al., 2015; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Diehl, 2014; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Mahboubeh et al., 2015; Sampson et al., 2015; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Several of these research studies have shown that discrimination, stereotyping, a school board's lack of information regarding female candidates' qualifications, workplace harassment, and exclusionary practices impact the ascension to top positions (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Diehl, 2014; Rhode, 2017; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Jones and Palmer (2011) found, from their mixed-methods research design with 3,726 participants, that working relationships impact a woman's rise to the top. As a scholar and author related to women and leadership, Rhode (2017) also identified the value of equal opportunity for females, gender bias, favoritism, work-life conflicts, and concluded that the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles remains constant.

Regardless of which obstacles women face, the research on disproportionality has indicated that within K-12 school districts, male leadership is the norm (Dowell &

Larwin, 2013; Sampson et al., 2015; T. Wallace, 2015). One example of this imbalance was addressed through Dowell and Larwin's (2013) gender-based study about compensation and promotion. They discovered that the rise to the top is slower for women than for men, and that pay inequities exist for women in top educational leadership roles. To determine whether the disparity and disproportionality identified here is the result of noted internal or external barriers requires further investigation.

Self-Imposed Barriers

In addition to these external influences, researchers have also noted that women must overcome internal obstacles that are found to be self-imposed or directly related to interactions with other women (Jones & Palmer, 2011; Sampson et al., 2015). Research in women's leadership has found that women continue to face their own internal barriers as they embark on their journeys to achieve leadership positions (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Diehl, 2014; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Rhode, 2017; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Both Derrington and Sharratt (2009) and Diehl (2014) identified the difficulty women face to find a work-life balance. Diehl (2014) elaborated on her research findings when she noted that relationship stress and a woman's own perceptions about her self-identity make a difference. These internal barriers occur when women choose to opt out of the job for a work-life balance, as a result of different lifestyle choices, and when they do not believe in their own abilities (Diehl, 2014; Rhode, 2017; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; Sui Chu Ho, 2016).

The demands placed on women at home, coupled with the work of a superintendent, may make the leadership challenge unacceptable. Researchers have discovered that as women still carry greater home responsibilities than their spouses,

motherhood and family obligations often influence a woman's decision not to seek a superintendency (Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). As a result, these conflicting priorities may influence the number of women choosing to apply for the top leadership role, which, in turn, retains the issue of gender disproportionality for school superintendents and school boards (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). While these same demands may impact all women in leadership positions, this study is only meant to reflect the findings from female superintendents.

Researchers have also found that there is a linkage between internal or self-imposed barriers and external influences from other women (Jones & Palmer, 2011). A woman's self-perception is found to be evident in the relationships and potential gender bias from other females (Jones & Palmer, 2011). Still, while Jones and Palmer (2011) did find that even though the majority of women perceived support from other women on the career advancement side, they also indicated that jealousy was a concern. These contradictions led researchers to suggest that to mitigate against these self-imposed and women-to-women gender barriers and to bring about gender proportionality, women must be aware of their surroundings; know that gender bias exists; be prepared to take advantage of leadership opportunities; create opportunities for themselves; and finally, they must move forward with "realistic optimism" (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; J. Wallace, Wallin, Vicko, & Anderson, 2014; Young, Kowalski, McCord, & Petersen, 2012). Two U.S. research studies, which analyzed lived experiences of female academics, also revealed that women should take responsibility for furthering their own leadership aspirations and find balance between their work and professional lives (Wallace et al., 2014; Young et al., 2012). Even while these internal

barriers, which remain under the control of the aspiring female superintendent, exist, external barriers influence a woman's rise to top positions.

Social Discrimination

Upon further investigation into the issue of gender disproportionality in senior leadership roles, the research has shown that the principles of equal opportunity and social justice for women may be compromised as a result of several external barriers (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Rhode, 2017). One of these external barriers researchers have concluded, which is based on gender identity, social norms, and institutional biases, is social discrimination (BlackChen, 2015; Blackmore, 2010; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Shakeshaft, 2016). To explain this further, Blackmore's (2010) conceptual paper, drawing on gendered and racialized research in Australia indicated that there is a *pedagogy of discomfort* when learning about leadership, that power relationships exist between gender and diversity, and that leadership identity is necessary for gender equality. Complementing Blackmore's (2010) work, A. Cook and Glass (2014) noted that underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions is a reality and concluded that to bring about balance and proportionality, organizations should focus on the reduction of social discrimination to bring gender balance into their top positions.

Researchers have also revealed that these aspects of social discrimination negatively impact the opportunity to achieve proportionality in senior leadership roles (BlackChen, 2015; Blackmore, 2010; Burkman & Lester, 2013; Burton & Weiner, 2016; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Diehl, 2014; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Sampson et al., 2015; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). This barrier of social discrimination or judgment, related to gender identity and social norms, is one area in

which researchers suggested needs to be addressed for women to be successful in their career aspirations (Manfredi, 2017; Rhode, 2017).

Manfredi's (2017) research into the UK's Equity Act 2010, revealed that to tackle the issue of gender disproportionality in top educational leadership roles requires action on the part of the government. While governmental intervention was not necessarily a finding from many researchers, scholars have noted that society has preconceived ideas of women in leadership roles. Shakeshaft (2016) and others noted that females have embodied a specific set of social skills and experiences. These feminine skills and experiences, embedded within societal norms, have been developed through the uniqueness of the gender, and while not all women have experienced events, interactions, or knowledge growth in the same manner, they are similar (BlackChen, 2015; Shakeshaft, 2016). The feminine experience, therefore, as viewed through societal and institutional lenses, led Blackmore (2010) to identify that leadership identity and the consequential lack of understanding about gender differences is a barrier to proportionality.

More recently, Lumby (2013) added to this discussion when she suggested that within the workplace, the female identity is viewed as motherly; yet, when females are identified as leaders, they are viewed more negatively than their male counterparts. These socially accepted norms and embedded beliefs, regarding identity and the stereotyping of individuals, are described as evidence of and one reason why the gender disproportionality problem may persist (Vinkenburg, Van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). Further support for Lumby's (2013) findings resulted from Vinkenburg et al.'s (2011) earlier studies in which they examined the leadership styles of women

versus men. These researchers discovered that leadership styles were important to promotion opportunities, yet the ongoing stereotypical beliefs around gender remained. Vinkenburg et al. (2011) concluded their research when they stated that women themselves need to find opportunities to expand their leadership.

Coupled with the privilege of masculinity and a lack of understanding the other gender, this barrier of social discrimination continues to impede women within the patriarchal society of school system administration (Shah & Shah, 2012). As various researchers have noted, women are found to have limited entry into senior educational leadership positions and this issue both leads to and promotes disproportionality (Mahboubeh et al., 2015; Shah & Shah, 2012).

While gender disproportionality has been shown to be prevalent as a result of social discrimination related to gendered identity, a further aspect of the social discrimination barrier is institutional bias (Blackmore, 2010; Rhode, 2017). Evidence to support institutional bias as a barrier to proportionality, was described by Blackmore (2010) when she discovered that educational institutions are not integrating the professional learning of leaders directly into their structural processes. Burton and Weiner (2016) also discovered that professional learning and leadership preparation programs are missing components of gender identity and an understanding of how bias influences leadership. Carr (2012), in a review of the literature, also stated that the gender gap continues to exist and that professional learning opportunities and mentoring are possible actions that may lead to balance. Carr's work adds to the findings of Burton and Weiner (2016) and Rhode (2017) which suggested that if institutionally based preparation programs and professional development opportunities continue to reflect a male-

dominated interpretation of the world, women will continue to be placed in a position of disadvantage, their leadership career paths will be restricted, and disproportionality will remain as an issue.

Brue and Brue's (2016) phenomenological study into women's leadership programs revealed that women continue to struggle as they advance into leadership positions. They found that if leadership training for men and women were to reflect on gender-equity and new norms, these institutionally-based preparation programs may promote gender neutrality and focus on empowerment of the individual (Brue & Brue, 2016). Even as leadership preparation and professional development programs are important, Searby, Ballenger, and Tripses (2015) and Brue and Brue (2016) found that diminishing institutional bias and creating gender proportionality may also be achieved through mentoring programs created for women. Another barrier to gender proportionality, the lack of effective and gender-specific mentorship is examined later in this chapter.

Recruitment and Hiring Practices

A second external barrier to the achievement of proportionality in senior leadership roles was found to be male-dominated recruitment and hiring practices (Celikten, 2010; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Manfredi, 2017; Nanton, 2015; Sampson & Davenport, 2010). Celikten's (2010) Turkish study into the attitudes of female administrators identified women as being perceived as having lesser skill than men and that when hiring, negative stereotypes were promoted. This research also concluded that women support female administrators more so than their male colleagues or managers

and that they are most likely to have negative attitudes about women in leadership positions.

More reflective of North American practices and based on Sampson and Davenport's (2010) study of women superintendents in Texas, findings showed that school boards continue to hire males into superintendencies, that disproportionality remains, and if proportionality is to become a goal of hiring boards, developing programs and workshops about disparity, would be helpful.

As the hiring of senior-level educational administrators is the responsibility of school boards, and as school boards were found to hire people like themselves, practices are often skewed in favor of men (Celikten, 2010; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Sampson & Davenport, 2010). These individual and institutional biases were found to impact whether a woman will have the opportunity to obtain a top leadership position (Coleman, 2012; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011). One example of how these hiring processes impact women candidates was shown through Gaucher et al.'s (2011) gendered word study. The researchers found that in addition to promoting institutional ideologies and beliefs, the wording on job advertisements often displays masculine phraseology. This masculine language revealed possible gender disproportionality in the hiring process; based on the wording of the job advertisement, women participants indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging (Gaucher et al., 2011). Social structures and beliefs like these, which may appear to be innocuous and include innocent language, instead permeate an institution's job recruiting processes, promote male leadership, and maintain gender disproportionality (Gaucher et al., 2011).

Career Advancement

Social discrimination and hiring practices are not the only barriers facing women leaders. The research indicated that men achieve leadership successes more quickly than women; the issue of gender disproportionality is then perpetuated (Celikten, 2010). As was previously noted, men maintain the power of decision making in school districts, and school boards hire people like themselves; however, the impact of career advancement opportunities was further found to influence gender disproportionality in superintendent positions (Celikten, 2010; A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; T. Wallace, 2015). For all individuals aspiring to become superintendents, it was discovered that opportunities for advancement are linked to principalships and mid-level leadership positions in central offices (Bjork et al, 2014; Celikten, 2010; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012; Sampson et al., 2015; T. Wallace, 2015). Essentially, the accepted practice for hiring a superintendent is for the individual to first become a classroom teacher, followed by a move to the position of school principal (Bjork et al, 2014; Celikten, 2010; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012; T. Wallace, 2015). More specifically, the career path from principal to superintendent was most often found to be through the secondary school principalship (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012). In addition to Pankake and Muñoz's (2012) article which noted the method through which to achieve a central office position, Bjork et al.'s (2014) study of United States superintendents confirmed what other researchers noted; the career path to a superintendency is consistent. First, the individual must be a teacher, become a school-based principal, and finally, they may move to the superintendent level.

Complicating the career advancement of principals into superintendencies is the difficulty experienced when moving from the position of elementary principal to superintendent. This complication may exist for all elementary principals, yet for female elementary principals, the career route is less clear (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012). This lack of clarity for women seeking a superintendency, from their position as an elementary principal, is often based on the assumption that women are less capable, and they are more often hired into other curriculum areas (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012). Research has shown that these gendered belief systems often influence the hiring process (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012).

Regardless of the career route available, there is no guarantee of obtaining a senior educational leadership position. For women, the aforementioned issues of gender bias and discrimination, which are based on social beliefs and norms, were found to be deterrents to gender proportionality and career advancement (T. Wallace, 2015). To reach the superintendent position, the pinnacle of educational success in K-12 systems, researchers have found that women have to wait longer, remain determined, fight harder, and survive scrutiny and social bias (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; T. Wallace, 2015).

The Glass Ceiling

A fourth barrier, often a metaphor or symbol used to describe the challenges women, in all industries face, when ascending to top positions, is the glass ceiling. Women's studies researchers describe this phenomenon, which also impacts gender proportionality, as an invisible barrier through which women must break to achieve a higher leadership position (A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Javdani, 2015; Kaiser & Wallace, 2016; Kenschaft et al., 2016; Sabharwal, 2015; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Wood,

2009). Some researchers have suggested that women must break through the glass ceiling, whereas men are seen to ride the glass elevator to the top. Others have identified sticky floors and glass cliffs for women looking to advance their careers in leadership (A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Sabharwal, 2015; Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2013).

Regardless of which of these metaphorical illustrations an individual accepts, it is believed that these on-going perceptions and beliefs continue to perpetuate gender disproportionality in school superintendencies (Sampson & Davenport, 2010). Sampson and Davenport (2010) summarized previous research and stated that K-12 superintendents' positions were one of the most male-dominated of all professional positions in education. As a result of women often being funneled into curriculum development positions or remaining in teaching, females are found to be 40 times less likely than men to break through the perceived glass ceiling (Sampson & Davenport, 2010). Gender proportionality is therefore seen as less probable.

In contrast to the aforementioned beliefs surrounding the glass ceiling, Sui Chu Ho (2016), in a book chapter for the book *Women Leading Education*, suggested that the glass ceiling metaphor is no longer accurate. While gender disproportionality continues to exist, the glass ceiling barrier is now often considered as a labyrinth of sex discrimination, domestic responsibilities, and self-imposed beliefs (Sui Chu Ho, 2016). These varied opinions about the glass ceiling phenomenon are found to be inconclusive, yet the glass ceiling, or as it is now often described—a labyrinth of leadership barriers—continues to hinder women from ascending the leadership ladder (A. Cook & Glass, 2014; Kenschaft et al., 2016; Sampson & Davenport, 2010). In conclusion, researchers have discovered that the invisible glass ceiling, or perhaps more accurately, a labyrinth of

the aforementioned gender barriers, remains a threat to gender proportionality in leadership positions (Kenschaft et al., 2016).

Lack of Mentorship

One final external barrier to women achieving a superintendency was found to be the lack of opportunities for women to be mentored by other women. Since mentoring is found to be closely aligned to increased career and job satisfaction, mentorship researchers, have discovered that regardless of the industry, greater opportunities for advancement and a reduction in the learning curve, are valuable outcomes of any mentoring relationship (G. Brown & Irby, 2012; Dominguez & Hager, 2013; Gordon, 2016; Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016). Studies about adult mentoring experiences by Dominguez and Hagar's (2013) Holt et al. (2016) and Gordon (2016) all confirmed the value of mentoring relationships. Within the educational leadership realm however, T. Wallace (2015) also discovered that for aspiring female superintendents to become more effective and for school districts to increase the proportionality of women superintendents, it is important to learn from women already in the field. In summary, mentoring was found to be the most important tool for women striving to attain a superintendency; yet, the number of women available to provide mentoring has been found to be fewer than for males (T. Wallace, 2015).

Even though there is no single mentoring tool that works in all situations, Bowser, Hux, McBride, C. Nichols, and Nichols' (2014) qualitative research on mentorship within educational leadership discovered that the most effective means of support is through careful matching and where programs are designed to meet the needs of both protégés and mentors. Conclusions drawn from these and other researchers indicated there are

three essential elements to a successful mentorship experience: (a) the quality of the relationship, (b) the contact time available, and (c) the similarity between the mentors and protégées (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; G. Brown & Irby, 2012; Bynum, 2015; Chun, Sosik, & Yun, 2012; Dominguez & Hager, 2013; Holt et al., 2016; Laukhuf & Malone, 2015; Mullen & Schunk, 2012; Rhode, 2017; Searby et al., 2015). In similar mentorship articles and research studies by Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016), G. Brown and Irby (2012), Bynum (2015), and Laukhuf and Malone (2015), the researchers summarized that women seek other women to be their mentors and that combined with the right mentor, each of these three previously noted elements were necessary and obtainable.

There is a great deal of research into the areas of both informal and formal mentorship experiences. Chun et al.'s (2012) longitudinal study into formal mentoring programs revealed that the function and purpose of the formal program is directly related to positive outcomes. Later studies by Bynum (2015) and Holt et al. (2016) examined informal mentorship and found that these relationships too, were often a means to career success. Various studies have examined formal and informal programs; the conclusions of the researchers indicated that when all three noted elements are in place, the protégé's career success is optimized.

Further related to this discussion of the elements necessary for an effective mentorship experience for women, researchers have also found that without the influence of female mentors, women are often left out of the mentorship loop, and that even when they are involved in mentorship programs, the right match is not always available (Rhode, 2017). Researchers have also discovered that there are fewer women in the upper leadership ranks and fewer women who are able to mentor others; when women do

mentor other females, researchers have stated that women often have limited time to support their protégées (Ellerson, 2016; Rhode, 2017). This challenge becomes a deterrent to sustainable and effective mentorship programs and allows for fewer women to advance into the ranks of system leader.

In a further study of mentorship and gender, Carr (2012) suggested that as it is often difficult for many females to find mentors and they find their career development lacking. In contrast to this discovery, researchers have also found that women are being mentored, they are mentoring others, that many protégées have multiple mentors of both genders, and that relationships are developed formally, informally, and intentionally (Searby et al., 2015; Sperandio, 2016). Nonetheless, while several researchers did discover that women appreciated the multiplicity and diversity of their mentors, others suggested that random pairings and often those across gender and racial lines created less than comfortable mentoring relationships (Kim, 2014; Rhode, 2017; Searby et al., 2015; Sperandio, 2016). In an article focusing on mentorship and networking, Kim (2014) added that where networking was combined with mentoring, successful relationships were more likely.

It has been stated that mentorship is both an equalizer and an opportunity to develop individuals; yet, the real value in the mentorship experience lies in creation of appropriate and gender-specific mentoring relationships, where ample time is given to the relationship, and where women who have commonalities are able to work together and grow the protégées (Rhode, 2017; Sperandio, 2016). When gender-specific mentorship opportunities are made available for women, gender proportionality within school systems and other organizations may be enhanced (Rhode, 2017; Sperandio, 2016).

In contrast to the literature that supports positive mentorship experiences, Kumar and Blake-Beard (2012) studied the impact of negative mentorship relationships. They found that there might be a dark side to mentoring as intrinsic and extrinsic values differ based on descriptions men and women give of career success (Kumar & Blake-Beard, 2012). While there is little research indicating the negative side of mentoring for aspiring women leaders, some researchers have stated opposing views on the value of the mentorship experience and that not all mentorship opportunities have similar constraints and not all are defined in the same manner (Brondyk & Searby, 2013). In support of this claim and in a conceptual paper by Brondyk and Searby (2013) the researchers discovered that as there is ambiguity within the concept of mentorship, organizations need to be clear on the end goals.

Most studies and academic articles, however, show the positive aspects of working closely with others in a supportive, well-connected, and gender-specific relationship (Bearman, Blake-Beard, Hunt, & Crosby, 2010; Oram-Sterling, 2016; Searby et al., 2015; Rhode, 2017). Coleman (2012) suggested that to bring about proportionality, women should not focus on the negative aspects of gender barriers but instead focus on ways to overcome the aforementioned barriers. This focus, researchers have found, is where mentoring and networking are viewed as most helpful (Bynum, 2015; Coleman, 2012; Rhode, 2017). To further examine the issue of gender disproportionality in K-12 system leadership, theoretical frameworks may provide further insights into why women superintendents have experienced this issue.

Theoretical Connections to Disproportionality

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) indicated that theories identify relationships between interrelated ideas, assumptions, and generalizations. Smith and Blenvinu (2013) discovered that the facts related to these relationships become more meaningful when considered within the context of a theory. Reasons for the disproportionality of women leaders may be better understood when observed within a theoretical framework and when relationships are examined. Feminist and social capital theories are two key lenses through which to examine the issue of gender disproportionality within the K-12 superintendent environment. By learning about the experiences and perceptions of current female superintendents, the theoretical frameworks, which were used in this study, show how gender differences and societal relationships impact gender disproportionality.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory has been identified by scholars as a conceptual framework that allows individuals to examine, describe, and clarify circumstances in which gender differences are not only observed, but where women are seen to be dominated by men (Kenschaft et al., 2016; Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2013; McCann & Kim, 2013; Stovall, Baker-Sperry, & Dallinger, 2015). It has also been found that through use of a feminist lens, the issue of gender disproportionality and differences in school district leadership, can be studied (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2016; T. Wallace, 2015). While these differences are noticeable, and as disproportionality remains as an issue, it is also important to point out that researchers and academic writers often use several terms to describe gender difference and male domination. In this regard, much of the relevant literature was found

to use both the terms *feminist theory* and *feminist standpoint theory*, interchangeably (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2016; Shakeshaft, 2016). For the purposes of this discourse, the term feminist theory was used.

As it has previously been found that men are more often represented in superintendent positions, and as gender disproportionality has been clearly established, research has also shown that women superintendents have experienced the perception and belief that women are seen as different, inferior, or of lesser value than men (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2016; T. Wallace, 2015). Within the feminist theory literature, this difference becomes even more evident when the principle of power and power differential is described; Beka (2016), Moorosi (2016), and Shakeshaft (2016) all identified power distance as a central tenet of feminist theory. Feminist theorists have identified gender differences when assessing oppression and validating past experiences, leading to the issue of power difference (Beka, 2016; Moorosi, 2016; Shakeshaft, 2016; T. Wallace, 2015).

Translating the issue of power and power difference into the realm of school district leadership and gender disproportionality, feminist theories provide the intellectual tools for researchers and philosophers to: share historical and current knowledge related to power and gender injustices, build arguments for change, and subsequently lead to an increase in the proportional representation of females in leadership roles (McCann & Kim, 2013; Moorosi, 2016; Newcomb & Grogan, 2016; Schues, 2011). When studying the issue of gender disproportionality, researchers have also suggested that a feminist lens provides one means by which to look at how the lives and careers of women are different than for men, and how the central issue of power is used (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011;

Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2013; T. Wallace, 2015). Within the educational context, Dentith and Peterlin's (2011) qualitative study found that to connect personal experiences to feminist theories allows students to see themselves as future feminist leaders.

It is by looking at the issue of disproportionality through a feminist lens that feminist theorists are able to acknowledge that parity is not the norm; rather, they stated that it is most important to examine how women can attain their share of the power and how to put appropriate structures in place (Blount, 2012). Power for women, Enke (2014) found, is not individualistic but rather is identified within the community. Through her qualitative study of women leaders in U.S. Colleges, Enke (2014) found that women prefer to act according to the noted feminist perspective of power-to and power-with, rather than the traditional power-over and power-from conceptions attributed to masculine leadership. Presently, and through the lens of feminist theory, the existence of gender disproportionality in superintendencies suggests that until changes are made, school districts remain predominantly power-over and power-from environments for superintendents. It is from this perspective of power that gender disproportionality was examined in this study. Through the analysis of the women participants' experiences and perceptions, power related to gender difference was examined and conclusions drawn.

In summary, both Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Pasque (2013) noted that feminist theorists see value in the differences associated with individuals, they remain open to different identities and lived experiences, and they assess the contrasting social circumstances in which women live and work. When evaluating the issue of gender disproportionality in this study, the use of feminist theory provides one foundation upon

which to identify and examine possible causes and specific circumstances for the gender disproportionality, disparity, and inequities found in superintendencies.

Social Capital Theory

A second theoretical lens from which to examine gender disproportionality in superintendencies is social capital. Described by experts, social capital theorists examine societal relationships based on an understanding of how structural limits and hierarchies, as well as social networks and actions, are interconnected (Alfred, 2009; Kenschaft et al., 2016; Thomä, Henning, & Schmid, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Social capital theorists make these connections while also examining individual well-being through the blending of human sociability and economic capital (Alfred, 2009; Kenschaft et al., 2016; Thomä et al., 2014; Wilson, 2016). In response to these noted foundational concepts of social theory, an examination of gender disproportionality in senior educational leadership roles provides an opportunity to see how well-being is experienced by female superintendents.

First, as described by researchers Díez-Vial & Montoro-Sánchez (2014) and Pompper (2012) there are three dimensions to be understood when looking at the issue of gender disproportionality: (a) relational, (b) communicative, and (c) structural. The first dimension of social capital—the relational aspect—identifies that leaders and mentors influence others, not only because of their knowledge, but also as a result of their social structure within the organization. Galunic, Ertung, and Garguilo, (2012) studied social capital and networking and found that both social structure and networking actions impact senior leaders.

While much of the literature on this first dimension of social capital is reflective of benefits and the positive connections and relationships within organizations, there are

also downsides. The negative side of social capital relates to the reinforcement of social behaviors that are not beneficial to society (Halstead & Deller, 2015; Thomä et al., 2014). In light of both the positive and negative impacts of social capital theory, both Halstead and Deller (2015) and Thomä et al. (2014) noted that the influence of social capital on gender disproportionality in leadership is found in the relational aspect of belongingness within society and the community.

The second dimension of social capital is communication. Results of Roberts' (2013) action research study suggested that social capital is important to individuals and organizations. Within organizations and school districts are not an exception, the development of social capital through the element of communication enhances growth, creates opportunities for relationships to build, and both reinforces and promotes social networks (Roberts, 2013). It is through this dimension of communication that social capital in school districts and other organizations is evidenced in activities like listening and sharing information and through offering feedback and teaching others (Pompper, 2012). Pompper (2012) and Roberts (2013) both suggested that the application of the social capital communication principle therefore builds on the previously noted relational aspect, while also enhancing leadership, supporting safe environments, building stronger networks, and strengthening trust. As relationships and communication are interconnected within social capital thinking and linked to the well-being of others, researchers have also discovered that these elements are foundational to the development of leaders (Alfred, 2009; Roberts, 2013; Thomä et al., 2014).

The issue of gender disproportionality in school system leadership may become balanced through increased and effective communication and with an intention to

improve upon social capital and the well-being of others. In a study on gender and social capital, Suseno, Pinnington, and Gardner (2007), posited that even though men hold greater power within organizations and they often reach higher levels in management, disproportionality may be lessened when women choose to advance their own social capital and their careers through conscious networking and the building of relationships linked to solid communication strategies. These opportunities may be found through mentorship programs, which were earlier noted in this chapter.

Structure, the third component of social capital, is described as the knowledge sharing and cognitive aspect (Díez-Vial & Montoro-Sánchez, 2014). Within the educational environment, both Riley's (2013) and Bartee's (2012) research studies revealed that structure is observed both in daily practices and when balancing the needs of the communities to be served. Educational leaders who seek balance, engage in effective communication strategies, and pay attention to the relationships that form, will be most successful (Bartee, 2012; Riley, 2013). Even though the specific issue of gender disproportionality in senior educational leadership was not found in the social capital theory research, the essence of the theory and the relationships that need to be created within the educational and leadership milieus can be transferred into further discussion and study into gender disproportionality and the well-being of others.

In consideration of these three elements of social capital theory, and in connection with the multiple case study, this lens provides the opportunity to look more deeply at gendered relationships within the educational realm. The previously noted definition of social capital theory identified hierarchies and networks as being interconnected. As these

hierarchies and networks also exist in the educational milieu, this lens to examine how the well-being of women is linked to gender disproportionality.

In conclusion, feminist and social capital theories are two lenses through which to interpret findings and identify relationships related to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. As the disproportionality of genders within senior education leadership is revealed and acknowledged as being true, it will be difficult to avoid this imbalance without also seeking ways to shift the current state (T. Wallace, 2015). In summary, Pastoriza and Ariño (2013) noted that ethical and effective leadership promotes social capital, and feminist theory supports gender proportionality (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2013). Further examination through the lens of both feminist and capital theory may promote solutions to the issue of how gender disparity and disproportionality exists in the school superintendent position. With this intention in mind, strategies for alleviating the discovered socially accepted gender biases related to difference and power, and finding ways to shift the current hierarchical structures, were identified in this study.

Chapter Summary

The research explored in this literature review identified that gender disproportionality in senior leadership is evident in school district environments. While the teaching profession is predominantly female, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions (AASA, 2016; Burkman & Lester, 2013; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Carr, 2012; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Lumby, 2013; T. Wallace, 2015). As a means to understand the challenges women face, the research revealed that internal and external barriers continue to impact women on their journey to attain superintendent

positions. Social discrimination, stereotyping, the glass ceiling phenomenon, and the lack of effective and gender-specific mentorship programs are shown to exist in the male-dominated educational environment (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; T. Wallace, 2015). Also influencing a woman's rise to the superintendency are school district recruitment and hiring practices, career advancement opportunities, and self-imposed barriers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Jones & Palmer, 2011; Sampson & Davenport, 2010). Education, which relies on social relationships, has not removed male privilege or system bias toward women in leadership, and gender disproportionality continues to be evident (Blackmore, 2010; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; T. Wallace, 2015).

As theoretical frameworks are seen as a means to view this issue of gender disproportionality, both feminist and social capital theories are frameworks to further examine the issue. Accordingly, through the lens of the feminist theoretical framework, researchers noted that women continue to battle issues of power and control, including domination, and social inequality (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2013; McCann & Kim, 2013). Unavoidably, these challenges transfer into the K-12 superintendent environment and where gender disproportionality is observed (Rhode, 2017; T. Wallace, 2015).

Research on social capital theory identified that the relational, communicative, and structural dimensions of the theory are the cornerstones to the well-being of individuals and organizations (Bartee, 2012; Leeves & Herbert, 2014; Pompper, 2012; Riley, 2013). As school system environments are clearly focused on the well-being of others, social capital is a key element of the leader's effectiveness. While examining both of these theories, the underlying issue of gender disproportionality in senior educational

leadership roles was noted; to influence social change however, there needs to be a shift to proportionality and the elimination of specific gender barriers (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015).

The aforementioned contributions from the research supported the current issue of gender disproportionality in senior leadership. Within the first part of this chapter, it was noted that women face more barriers than men when ascending the leadership ladder. It was also discovered that there is very little research that completely addresses gender disproportionality; rather, much of the literature was focused on inequality. This lack of clarity surrounding the issue of fewer women than men, in superintendent roles, may cause confusion and the depths of the real issue left unaddressed. To focus more fully on the specific issue of gender disproportionality in the superintendent role, particularly when compared to the general and educator populations, may reveal the root causes that impact and influence this issue.

The second part of this chapter described two theories: feminist and social capital. Through these two lenses, the issue of gender disproportionality in educational leadership was examined. Based on these theories and previously described literature, it was found that a shift to equal opportunity, social justice, and proportional representation of both the general and educator populations, is an area to be addressed and one to further fill the research gaps (Ellerson, 2016; Heslinga, 2013; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Lumby, 2013; Rhode, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Schuh et al., 2014). By using an explanatory multiple case study method, reasons for the disproportionality of women in Canadian superintendent roles were discovered. Further detail regarding the explanatory multiple case study methodology are presented in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The issue of gender disproportionality and disparity is evident within both the North American and worldwide K-12 superintendent environments (Burkman & Lester, 2013; Carr, 2012; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; T. Wallace, 2015). To support this claim, researchers have shown that while the number of women in the teaching force is larger than that of the male population, when it comes to the superintendent position, men outnumber women (AASA, 2016; Burton & Weiner, 2016). It has also been discovered that while gender disproportionality in school system leadership is ongoing and unresolved, this issue compromises equal opportunity, social justice, and the proportional representation of both the general and educator populations (Heslinga, 2013; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Lumby, 2013; Nanton, 2015; Rhode, 2017; Schuh et al., 2014).

In this chapter, a description of case study research methodology is provided. Four research questions, developed through both an examination of the literature and in consultation with the dissertation chair, are noted. By addressing the following research questions, the problem of gender disproportionality in school superintendencies and the resultant findings from this research study are to be made available to aspiring and current women superintendents, as well to individuals involved in hiring processes.

1. How do female superintendents experience gender disproportionality in two Canadian provinces?
2. What effect, if any, does gender disproportionality have on the female superintendents in these two provinces?

3. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of disproportionality between the female superintendents in these two provinces?
4. What factors do the female superintendents attribute to gender disproportionality in their provinces?

To answer these questions and to achieve the identified purpose, this chapter is divided into six sections: (a) research method, (b) research design, (c) participants, (d) data analysis methods, (e) limitations, and (f) a summary.

Research Method

This qualitative multiple case study approach, related to disproportionality within K-12 senior leadership, was adapted from the methodology described by Yin (2014).

There are several reasons why the case study research design was chosen. The first reason for selecting this research methodology was that case studies may be most beneficial when examining a phenomenon or contemporary event or setting (Yin, 2014). Within this study on gender disproportionality, the issue or the phenomenon of disproportionality is assessed and evaluated after learning about the experiences of women superintendents. This phenomenon within real-life experience was both contemporary in nature and situation- or profession-specific.

As the study was explanatory in nature, the explanatory multiple case study research design supported an understanding of the issue of gender disproportionality in K-12 school superintendencies. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, two cases were studied; each case was assessed based on the experiences of female superintendents in each of two Canadian provinces. Each of the two cases was examined while constant comparisons of the data provided evidence to support or refute findings that have been

previously identified in the literature. In summary, as Yin (2014) stated, to understand intricacies associated with individual cases and to subsequently make comparisons, the use of an explanatory multiple case study is often a preferred research method.

The final rationale for using a case study research design relates to the awareness and use of boundaries. As the case study research methodology allows for one or more bounded systems to be examined and compared, research experts suggest that it is often the best method for completing an in-depth analysis of a situation or activity (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016; Yin, 2014). As cases are bounded by time and place, the individuals included in each of the two cases shared their experiences related to the issue and linked to the research questions. In each case, the boundaries of location and position, or more specifically, the province and the position of superintendent, bound the two systems or cases. This research was intended to discover answers to how disproportionality has been experienced by women superintendents in the K-12 environment; the explanatory multiple case study design uncovered perceptions and experiences within each case and allowed for comparisons of the two units of analysis.

Research Design

Prior to beginning the research process, IRB approval was required. Once this written approval was obtained, the processes of data gathering and analysis took approximately three months to complete. Following IRB approval, the data collection process began.

Within each of the two selected provinces, superintendents are required to hold membership in their relevant professional organization. Therefore, before embarking on the interviews, it was necessary to contact the executive directors of these two

organizations. The request for participation was extended through the senior executive member. Information about the study and a request for support and participation were disseminated, first by the executive director and then directly from the investigator. At this same time, it was also important to include a discussion of ethical responsibility and document that approval from the IRB had been received. This same process was required in both provinces. A copy of the correspondence is included in Appendix A.

Once approval was obtained from the professional organizations and after each executive director contacted all eligible participants, an introductory letter and a document of informed consent was sent to all eligible and interested participants. The informed consent agreement was either signed or verbally approved before participation proceeded. It was also expected that some of the participants may have wanted to discuss the study in advance; while this did not happen, had any participant requested this discussion, a phone conversation would have been arranged. Once the informed consent forms were signed and returned, they were secured in a password-protected computer file. Finally, prior to data gathering and after securing the participant agreement document, it was important to provide participants with information about the purpose of the study, the value and importance of participation, the anticipated timeline, and an assurance of confidentiality. A copy of the introductory letter, including this information, can be found in Appendix B, while the informed consent agreement is found in Appendix C.

After the participants were selected, information disseminated, and informed consent forms received, the data gathering began. The primary source of collecting data for the case study is the interview (Yin, 2014). For this study, semi-structured interviews

were the main sources of data collection. Each participant was asked to engage in an interview of approximately 45 minutes to one hour in length. These interviews, arranged to suit the schedule of the participants, were conducted over the phone.

Yin (2014) noted that these guided conversations, within the semi-structured interview format, should begin with a consistent line of inquiry or, more specifically, structured questions. Additional levels of questioning also included queries specific to selected interviewees, questions about the case, questions related to the patterns being discovered, and inquiries that went beyond the parameters of the study. Any last questions that came forward allowed the interviewee to make her own recommendations and for the interviewer to bring the discussion back to the original scope of the study. Finally, at the conclusion of the interview, each participant was asked whether, if necessary, she would be available for a follow-up interview and whether she would be open to reviewing the draft report. This step, more commonly referred to as *member checking*, was used to ensure the accuracy and internal validity of the research report (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016).

In addition to understanding the structure of the questioning to be used, a prepared interview guide directed the process. As Mertler (2016) noted, the interview guide is created to ensure that questions remain brief and clear. Within this research, key questions were used in all interviews and both optional and probing questions followed. As recommended by Yin (2014), care was taken to avoid leading questions, while at the same time paying attention to the subtleties of language used by the participants. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Brief notes were also kept during this time and

documents, records, and artifacts were secured in both primary and secondary files for analysis and examination. The interview guide is included in Appendix D.

In addition to the one-to-one semi-structured interviews, focus groups allowed for further data to be collected. These discussions, of approximately 45 minutes, were conducted via phone. Two focus groups were created and all participants were invited to contribute to the group discussion. When facilitating these focus groups, each participant was given equal opportunity to share her experiences as has been recommended by case study methodologist Mertler (2016).

The final source for data analysis was document examination. As previously noted, documents included school district policies and procedures, job postings, and school district newsletters. This form of analysis allowed for a more accurate understanding of the data gathered from the interviews and created a basis for comparison between the two cases. This process was recommended by experts in the research field: Patton (2015), Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicolls, and Ormston (2013).

Participants

Participants for this study were selected based on gender, location, and position. To select the women and the appropriate sites, an intensity sampling technique was used. This method of sampling is typical of case study research and best used when cases are information rich and clearly visible within the phenomenon or presenting issue (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Rationale for using intensity sampling was that the requested information could be obtained from the participants through the use of the aforementioned semi-structured interviews and where each interviewee had the opportunity to speak from personal experience.

Researchers have also noted that sampling size is dependent upon both the entire population and the unit of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016). Within case study research, the unit of study is referred to as a bounded system (Mertler, 2016). In this qualitative study, the two separate cases were restricted by the province in which the participants work and by their leadership role as school district superintendents. Linked to these restrictions and boundaries, the sample size for each case was directly impacted by the opportunity to include the entire targeted population and was completed when saturation was reached. In this multiple case study research, it was expected that saturation would be reached when at least 60% of potential participants agreed to participate in the study. Saturation was reached as 14 of the possible 19 women superintendents, participated in the study.

All of the women superintendents in the two provinces were asked to participate; only those who agreed to be part of this study and who signed the informed consent agreements were included. Even as the percentage of female superintendents in each province is only 20%, the intention was to interview at least 60% of the total number of female superintendents. The number of women who agreed to participate in this study exceeded the required number of respondents. All of the eligible women, who elected to contribute, were interviewed, and interviews were conducted with 14 women superintendents. Table 3.1 identifies the 14 participants, their years in K-12 education, the length of time each has been in their current superintendent position, and the number of superintendencies in which they have served. While this data is only indicative of the years it took for women respondents to achieve the superintendency, the career pathway remains the same for all individuals.

Table 3.1

Women Superintendents, Years in Education, Time in Current Position, and Number of Superintendent Positions Served

Name	Case 1	Case 2	Years in K-12 Education	Length of Time as Superintendent	Number of Different Superintendencies
Jenny	X		30+	20 years	3
Irene	X		20+	3 years	1
Leanne	X		20+	4 years	1
Janet		X	30+	10 years	1
Sandra		X	20+	4 years	1
Donna		X	30+	9 years	1
Debbie		X	30+	4 years	1
Katrina		X	30+	11 years	2
Jeannie		X	30+	14 years	2
Tonnie		X	20+	14 years	1
Mary		X	30+	5 years	1
Pauline		X	20+	Less than 1 year	1
Ana		X	20+	Less than 1 year	1
Carol		X	30+	3 years	1

The participant must have been a teacher who has achieved a bachelor's degree in education. In all situations, this step was followed by the assignment to a position of school-based administrator; where often a master's degree is required. Finally, each had moved on to the school district leadership positions, where it has been discovered that it takes longer for women to assume this top role. While current research has shown that women are outnumbering men in their bid to achieve an advanced degree, women are still outnumbered in the top-level leadership positions.

In summary, within each case, access to each of these participants was requested through the professional organization in which each superintendent holds membership. Detail regarding the process of securing these participants was provided earlier in this chapter. Finally, as the researcher is a past member of several professional educational

organizations in Canada, it was anticipated that access would be made available. This proved to be accurate.

Once access was gained and participants agreed to partake in the study, it was important for ethical considerations to be highlighted and that protection of all participants was ensured. As outlined by Yin (2014), care should be taken to: (a) gain informed consent from all participants, (b) protect all participants from harm, (c) maintain privacy and confidentiality (d) ensure that all precautions are taken for any individuals deemed to be vulnerable, and (e) confirm that the selection of participants is equitable. To preserve these ethical standards and guidelines, each participant was advised of ethical procedures, made aware of the approved IRB process, and asked to ensure their understanding of informed consent. Through this process, all of the previously mentioned ethical guidelines were followed. Finally, each participant was made aware that all data would be secured in a password-protected file, their real names would not be used, and they would be assigned a pseudonym. Following data gathering and transcription, data analysis began.

Data Analysis Methods

In this study, the first step in the analysis of the data was to describe the case and the settings. After the case and setting descriptions had been noted, attention was turned to the categorical aggregation of data. The data analysis process used for this study included four steps:

1. line-by-line coding,
2. focused coding,
3. conceptual categorizing, and

4. theme development.

As these four steps unfolded, constant comparisons of the data continued.

The process of analyzing the data, through this method of constant comparison, began after each interview had been conducted and after those specific data had been recorded. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested, the more familiar the investigator is with the raw data, the easier it is to develop codes, understand the big ideas, and refine the codes. With the bigger picture in mind and with the intent to understand the data as they were presented, the researcher became familiar with the data first through the use of line-by-line coding. This step was important to the entire coding scheme as it was at this stage where any repeated specific words, phrases, or observations were found throughout the data.

The data were then reduced to more manageable chunks through the process of focused coding. A list of focused codes, the ideas that are most often verbalized or found within other data sources, was created from the initial line-by-line coding process. As Charmaz (2014) and Saldaña (2016) have noted, while the use of focused codes originated in grounded theory research, it was seen as a necessary step in the coding process for this study. The use of focused coding, at this time, allowed for the most frequent ideas to be discovered and highlighted.

The third aspect of the coding scheme was to create conceptual categories that were relevant to the research questions (Mertler, 2016). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) have noted that these conceptual categories are to be connected to each research question. This connection was highlighted, and, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) also suggested, for each category, descriptors were used to show any new knowledge and learning that

had occurred throughout the data analysis and coding process. With these descriptors in mind, a number of categories linked to the research questions were created; descriptors were continuously added, deleted, mapped, and graphically presented. The process of creating categories was a matter of sorting and merging regularities while also capturing the recurring patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After the initial line-by-line, focused coding, and assigning of data to conceptual categories, the next step was to create even narrower themes or topics. At this point in the data analysis, these emerging themes and patterns were examined while also searching for discrepancies, ambiguities, and possible explanations for any inconsistencies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Mertler, 2016). As the data analysis process unfolded, the conclusions, as described in Chapter 4, were discovered, reinforced, and presented.

Finally, it is through the constant comparison and looking at both cases together that similarities were discovered and differences were identified. Through this ongoing and constant comparison of one code to the next, the categories and themes became clearer and the final narrative created. The final cross-case analysis and report included all themes and final recommendations. All data sources, including notes and memos, the data analysis and coding documents, field notes, and any supplementary documents and materials were easily accessible, which allowed the process of drawing conclusions to be straightforward. The research findings are reported in Chapter 4, while the conclusions and recommendations are described in Chapter 5. Further information relative to the themes, conceptual categories, and focused codes can be found in Table 4.1 in Chapter 4.

Limitations

This research study was subject to four limiting conditions. The first limitation was that the small sample size may have created some complications. It was important to obtain a sufficient number of participants within each of the two cases. However, this limitation did not arise as few women opted out of participation in this study. If, however, fewer than 60% of the eligible participants from the two provinces had chosen not to contribute to the study, female superintendents from a third province would have been asked to participate in the study. The criteria would have remained the same as previously noted.

A second limitation was that the experiences and perceptions of women in the two cases may have been different. This limitation could have been observed from the total number of school districts, the size of these jurisdictions, and the relevant school district and demographic data. Once again, this limitation did not arise. If it had arisen, as data analysis comparisons were constantly being conducted, further research may have been required.

Third, it may have been found that school systems conceptualize the role of the superintendent/director in different ways. It is evident that while different titles are used for the senior leadership position within the two provinces, similar provincial guidelines and legislation, and a similar understanding and description of senior educational leadership roles in the two provinces, are in place.

The final limitation considered was the possibility of bias on the part of the researcher. It was important to acknowledge this possibility as the researcher had past professional experiences as a director/superintendent in each of the provinces studied.

Therefore, this may have been seen as a potential bias and limitation. Suspending personal bias and setting aside any past assumptions was required. Otherwise known as bracketing, the researcher set aside her beliefs or judgments, to both maintain the integrity of the data, and to not interfere with the findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As anticipated, the researcher suspended personal judgement and bias.

Chapter Summary

Through a review of the literature, research has shown that women are underrepresented in K-12 school district superintendencies (AASA, 2016; Burton & Weiner, 2016). To examine the issue of disproportionality, this research provided an opportunity to explore this issue in two Canadian provinces. To find answers related to the research questions, the explanatory multiple case study format was favored.

Within this chapter, it was noted that participation in the study was determined through an intensive sampling technique. While it was anticipated that at least 60% of the women superintendents within each of the two cases would participate, a higher percentage, 70% of the eligible women superintendents, contributed. The qualitative data, gathered from each of these participants, emerged through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analyses. Coding and data analysis began with initial line-by-line and focused coding, followed by the creation of conceptual categories, and finally the establishment of themes.

In conclusion, as the results of this study will be shared, it is expected that the findings from this study will benefit school principals and superintendents who may be looking to advance in their leadership aspirations and promote equal opportunity, social

justice, and gender proportionality in the superintendent role. The results of this study are presented in Chapter 4 and the conclusions described in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The problem of gender disproportionality in educational leadership remains unresolved. This problem has shown to be evident in the US, where researchers have found that while 86% of teachers are women, only 33% of the women educators are leading at the superintendent level (Burton & Weiner, 2016). Canadian school districts, too, follow a similar pattern of disproportionality. For example, in Alberta, only 20% of superintendencies are held by women, and in Saskatchewan, only 18% of the school district superintendent positions are occupied by females (Cooke, 2016; Litun, 2016). These statistics reveal the specific problem, the lack of proportional representation of men and women in Canadian school superintendent positions.

The intent of this research was to understand how current K-12 superintendents, in two Canadian provinces, have experienced the issue of gender disproportionality in their top educational leadership roles. The following four research questions, developed from the literature review and in consultation with the Dissertation Chair, guided the study:

1. How do female superintendents experience gender disproportionality in two Canadian provinces?
2. What effect, if any, does gender disproportionality have on the female superintendents in these two provinces?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of disproportionality between the female superintendents in these two provinces?
4. What factors do the female superintendents attribute to gender disproportionality in their provinces?

This chapter presents an analysis of the data collected from interviews conducted with females who are currently serving in top educational positions, focus group interviews, and a review of documents related to the problem of gender disproportionality in two Canadian provinces. Using a multiple case study research design, qualitative data from a total of 14 female superintendents within the two cases, two focus group discussions, and a review of related documents were analyzed (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3 for a breakdown of participant demographics). Line-by-line and focused coding of both the interviews and focus group conversations led to the creation of conceptual categories. From these conceptual categories, six key themes were revealed. The written documents did not reveal any additional themes.

This chapter is structured around the six themes of: (a) emotional barriers, (b) lifecycle barriers, (c) administrative barriers, (d) gender norms, (e) gender differences, and (f) gender-specific mentoring and networking. The first three of these themes are related to barriers women superintendents face, and the last three themes are based on gender. Evidence to support each of these themes, and in response to the research questions, is provided through analysis of the data obtained from the female participants/superintendents and the responses they gave that were linked to possible causes for gender disproportionality.

Findings

Following data collection, the next step to determining key themes was the coding of data and subsequently the creation of themes. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, to make sense of the data, researchers must take the raw data, analyze the data, and eventually define identified themes prior to creating the final narrative. This final

narrative then provides answers to the research questions. The data analyzed in this research study, highlighted through barriers and gender-specific issues faced by women, has shown six key themes related to the issue of disproportionality of women superintendents in two Canadian provinces. From the personal experiences of all women superintendents in this study, Table 4.1 identifies each of these themes and the conceptual categories that formed the foundation or basis of each of the six themes.

These themes were created, and the details and words that follow are shared from the personal experiences and perceptions of the respondents. The next portion of this chapter defines the themes. Descriptions of the first three themes, which relate to barriers women face, are followed by the three gender related themes. Appendix E provides further information regarding the focused codes found in this study.

Table 4.1

Themes and Conceptual Categories

Themes	Conceptual Categories
Emotional Barriers	Fear Lack of Self-Confidence
Lifecycle Barriers	Support of Family Advanced Degree Life Choices
Administrative Barriers	Gender Makeup Policies and Procedures Elected Officials
Gender Norms	Misjudged and Misunderstood Exclusionary Behavior Too Emotional
Gender Differences	Male Leadership Female Leadership Stereotypes
Gender-Specific Mentoring/Networking	Gender-Specific Mentorship Networking

Emotional Barriers

The research revealed that women make choices based on their own personal circumstances and often in response to emotional barriers. Two conceptual categories emerged from the research: fear and the lack of self-confidence.

Fear. Fear was a word often used by women superintendents when they noted the challenges faced either by themselves or by other women aspiring to or advancing into senior leadership roles. Tonnie, one of the women interviewed in this study, summarized this best when she described the types of fear faced by women superintendents:

There's great reluctance by an awful lot of people, particularly females, to break out of that comfort zone. Fear of failure. Fear of rejection. Fear of criticism. And, you know, fear of burning bridges that they may not be able to go the other way.

Ana, another respondent, further expanded on fear when she discussed how a barrier mindset negatively influences a woman's choice to pursue a K-12 superintendency.

While Tonnie indicated that fear is an emotional barrier, Ana's description also indicated that women hide their fears by using other reasons for not applying for the top leadership positions:

I've encouraged females to apply for positions in leadership—and they use family as their reason for not—or they're not ready. Some of them don't have their master's because they've started out in teaching and haven't pursued an academic degree in terms of them being able to go into leadership roles. The fear of having to move to a new place is been a barrier mindset in terms of hiring. I think we've been very open in seeing who applies and being very fair in our selection process. I would say the number of applications there are for females are pretty limited. I think, right now, that there's a higher percentage of males applying for the positions.

While fear may be one emotional barrier faced by women—and one that may be hidden from others—a lack of self-confidence was also found to influence a woman's rise to the top of the educational career ladder.

Lack of self-confidence. Adding to the belief that women are fearful of the unknown, Jeannie added that women often identify or show negative self-perceptions or a lack of self-confidence as one reason for not entering the leadership realm:

When women get positions of leadership they say, “Oh man, I’d better really roll up my sleeves and earn this.” I think a lot of men get the, “Oh, they finally rewarded me.” I don’t know how else to explain it, but I sense that difference, and I would say even in my years as a teacher and working as a principal, etc. I saw that men never doubted in the same way that women do. That they could do this, or that they should apply or that they would be considered. I think women often don’t see themselves in quite that same way. There’s some awareness in most women, I think, that it’s going to be a harder battle for them. And, I think it is!

When further considering these emotionally-based reasons that women gave for not entering the superintendency, Janet’s description also indicated that this lack of confidence impedes a woman’s progression to the top educational leadership position:

I would say that there are a few reasons, one being how confident females feel in the education system. You know, when you’re a teacher, you’re pretty much in control of your audience, and you can feel very successful as a classroom teacher. As a female, if you step outside of that, and, you know, your confidence could be less or you feel that it’s less, when you step outside of that.

Therefore, this emotional barrier, or a lack of self-confidence, was found to be detrimental to women. Jenny best summed up the thoughts of herself and other superintendents when she, too, noted that for women to move forward with their career aspirations, “they need to be confident in their abilities.”

In conclusion, all the women interviewed suggested that while many females possess the necessary skills for taking on the superintendent’s role, fear and a lack of self-confidence are emotional barriers that influence a woman’s decision to move further up the educational career ladder. Debbie summarized this best when she stated, “a lot of women didn’t think they have the skills to do the job, and they need a lot more coaching to make that initial jump.” In addition to this first theme of emotional barriers, the second

theme found in this study is that of lifecycle barriers. The aforementioned emotional barriers may also influence lifecycle barriers, which include family supports and educational advancement opportunities. The life choices a woman makes, often based on emotional barriers, may be in conflict with a move into the top leadership position.

Lifestyle Barriers

The second theme discovered through this research, revealed that lifecycle barriers strongly influence women as they climb the career ladder. Leading to the creation of this theme, the conceptual categories of family responsibilities including spousal and family support, obtaining an advanced educational degree, and life choices were described as barriers women superintendents have faced.

Family support. Women were found to be fearful of the move into school district leadership positions; yet, the issue of family support, tied to family responsibilities and childcare was often seen as detrimental to women. For one woman, the issue of childcare and family responsibilities was irrelevant. For Pauline, although she does not have children and childcare, a gender bias was often expressed regarding her personal life and not having children of her own:

I always get that comment because I didn't have children. I'm married, and I always have that comment: umm, oh yeah, you can do that job because you don't have kids. I always, always, I used to get them when I was a principal and I still get it. And I have a colleague that is superintendent, and he's never had kids. He's a man, and I've asked him, I said, do you get that? Like do they say, well, you can do that job because you don't have kids? He said, no never. You know, women would say, you know I would never. You can do this job because you don't have kids. And I go, well, there were women before me, and they have kids. So, and, you know, for me, coming from a woman that asks me, that tells me that, I'm like, they would never say that to a man. And I'm like, why would they put that barrier on themselves? Like, it has nothing to do with the fact that I don't have kids, and I do have a husband and . . .

In essence, a woman without children may still be faced with gender bias when it comes to thinking about traditional family expectations and gender role stereotyping.

Still, most of the women participants did have children and expressed their admiration for both their spouses and their children, concluding that the need for full family support was critical to their success. Spouses and children have played an integral role in the lives of women superintendents. Cheryl described the support she received from her spouse and how valuable the shared childcare and other family responsibilities were to her:

You know, I've always been blessed with a family that believes you can do whatever you want in terms of if you work hard and do what you need to do. And a supportive family structure. Certainly, if we think in stereotype roles, you know, any central office role, including superintendent is far too rigorous not to be in a family structure that doesn't have traditional perspectives of what you need to do as a wife and a mother. I think that, you know, I've been fortunate to be in a family structure where my husband—and it's not about because you're the mom or the dad or the wife or the husband that you do certain things. I think having the support at home is really important to that because it's too overwhelming of a role to also have to assume all the traditional responsibilities at home that are often associated with being a wife and a mother.

Donna, too, expressed the importance of family and spousal support. She added that while not all women have similar experiences, family does influence their climb up the K-12 educational leadership ladder:

My husband is a farmer, so he is able to kind of carve his own hours to certain extent. So, he was able to look after our children as I was going through this process. But other people aren't so lucky. They need to say no. I can't take on a job if I want to raise a family, and it's sad if we have to pick one or the other.

Overall, the research revealed that shared family responsibilities and support from family members were key to a woman's success when applying for and achieving a superintendency.

Often based on family responsibilities, some women also opted to wait before applying for a superintendency until after their children had grown up. As a result of her need to make her family a priority and to take on the family responsibilities she believed in, Janet chose to put her career aspirations off to a later time. Janet described her choice to take on the school superintendency later in her life:

I would not go to a superintendent's role with a family. It would be very difficult to find balance there. You know, my children are grown up. Before I came into a superintendent role my daughter was graduating from high school. So basically, you know, my son and my daughter's life was beginning for them as young adults, and they didn't need me as much. Because coming into a superintendent's role the responsibility is huge, and if I had a young family I would not vie for it.

Mary also described this obstacle and how it impacted her learning of how to balance work with family responsibilities:

I guess it depends on how you lead again, and for me definitely, there was a disconnect. There was no way I could've, you know, given the kind of time and dedication that I wanted to, to my daughter and also serve as superintendent. It is all-encompassing work depending on how you do it. I would say that, you know, that many superintendents whether your male or female, speak to, you know, that you're on 24/7, right?

Domestic support, shared responsibilities, and women's choices, as they are related to family, were found to be considerations when women reflected on when to advance their careers and apply for superintendent positions.

It was discovered that while women participants described the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities and the superintendent's role early in their careers, most of the women superintendents added another idea which within the theme of lifecycle barriers. The barrier of obtaining a master's degree was noted as a difficulty for many women, particularly women in rural or northern communities.

Advanced educational degree. Several women, while indicating the need

for strong family support, also noted the challenge of obtaining a master's degree, a prerequisite for the superintendency. Coupled with the need to remain with the family, women reported that time, the location of the university program, and the ability to obtain the necessary university degree influenced a woman's rise to the top of the leadership ladder. Debbie upheld this discussion when she described how important technology is for the achievement of a master's degree, particularly when women have young families:

If you've got a family, it's very difficult to get a master's degree unless you totally go online. Anybody that I know that has had to move forward can find a way to get their children looked after. I don't know, would it be easier if childcare was more affordable? Yeah, probably. Would it be easier if the hours were a bit more flexible? Yeah, I would suspect that, but I don't have any evidence that that's the case.

Laura, too, spoke of the importance of technology and how helpful the computer and distance learning was for her, when she was ready to enroll in an advanced education degree.

So, for me to do a university master's degree, had it not been for distance education, would not have happened. So, technology really opens the door to women, I think, because we still are the main childcare providers. And, you know, if you're having babies in your late 20s and throughout your 30s, well, and raising a family until you're 40, it really eliminates your ability of getting more education and leaving your children to go out if you're in a rural setting. You know, it's different if you're living right in a city, but certainly if you're in a rural. So, I think that's one of the big reasons why women now are starting to move into those positions. Childcare is still very much the responsibility of the mom. So, I think that there are times when I'm spending 16 hours a day at my desk, in my office. My husband was able to look after our children as I was going through this process, but other people aren't so lucky. They need to say no. I can't take on a job if I want to raise a family and it's sad if we have to pick one or the other.

In all of the interviews in which women noted the barrier of achieving an advanced degree, the use of technology was seen as a key and important variable that allowed them or other women to enroll in a master's program.

While the women participants supported the use of technology to advance their careers, Janet also summarized the differences between genders when electing to engage in an advanced educational degree:

It seems that males have easier time accessing (education) as their families are growing up, than I, a female would. I was fortunate and had a very supportive husband who encouraged me 100% throughout my career. I did my master's when my children were small, but was it at an emotional risk for me.

In conclusion, it was found that women identified how family support and family responsibilities, coupled with the difficulty in obtaining a master's degree, played a role in their decision whether or not to apply for a superintendent position. Following directly from these first two categories, the third conceptual category, within the theme of lifecycle barriers, is the concept of life choices.

Life choices. Life choices play a key role in whether women choose to move into a superintendent position early in their careers or whether they elect to wait until later in life. While family responsibilities were noted by most participants, Tonnie's description provides insight into the overall view expressed by most female superintendents.

I think society as a whole still clings to some basic beliefs that were dominant years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago. . . The whole concept of females in the workforce as opposed to females raising children. That was a particular question that was asked of me 25 years ago before I was so rudely awakened. You have children, how are you going to do both jobs? I think some of those notions are still alive and well, and I think as a society we need to move forward so that we fully embrace each person as an individual. I may be showing my idealistic nature.

Societal norms, it was discovered, remain as difficulties women must overcome. Yet, as Jeannie noted, there are life choices women must face when they embark on their climb to the K-12 superintendency:

I see it as life choices. Nobody can have it all. You have to make some choices. So, if you are working in your career and you take several years off, maybe all at

once or, you know, you're back for two years and then you take two more off and then you're back for two and take another couple of years off. So, what happens is, you know, 10 years go by, and the person who's done that has not had as much experience as their colleagues that started at the same time. And so, you would expect other people in their career would move along in other places. So, there are some choices there to be made, and I think a lot has happened in the world of education to facilitate that. I mean, nobody gave me mat leave. You know what I'm saying? Or, you know, said, you could have parental leave and come back to a job, probably the same job, but if not, the same one that's an equivalent. I have to tell you I was the first pregnant principal in X school district, they hardly knew what to do with that. You know, no man had to forgo ever having a family or never been married because the job was going to demand too much of them. And if that's who you appoint, then what's the message to your women? That's what I meant by the subtle forms of discrimination that people don't necessarily see as discriminatory, but they are discriminatory.

While Jeannie primarily described her experiences and those of other women who take time away from their careers to have families, Leanne added that the career path is not direct:

Not only do women need to ensure they have the appropriate level of education, have experience in some form of leadership, but also how their commitment to family can be a sacrifice that men do not find necessary. I do think also because the careers, you know, you start moving forward, and your career builds from one step to the next without a doubt. It's sequential. You don't just jump big from teacher to being the director. But in order to go through those other pieces and go forward, you don't often just jump from being a teacher to being a principal either. You need your education. You need your master's degree in most cases. You certainly need to have had experience in different schools and you're successful if you have had background in different schools. Being willing to move around a little bit. You have to take on some leadership at the system and potentially at a provincial level. In order to do all that you need to be willing to, you know, devote your time to that. Which often means that your family, your children, you know, you don't get as much family time as perhaps others do. And I'm not so sure that even in our culture today that women are as either able or interested when your children are younger to take those moves and make that commitment and sacrifice at that time. Whereas and this might sound very sexist, but I do think it has some bearing on it, and I think men are a little bit more able to do that or willing to do that, or it's more acceptable to themselves. They do that, they start out on that journey earlier and it continues through.

This overriding sentiment, however, related to what women superintendents need and the life choices they make, was best expressed by Jenny:

You need grit. You need to be confident in your abilities. You need to be able to have balance. You need to know how to work hard and play hard. You need to know how to find balance, and if you're not, it's not going to work for anybody who's watching you. They look, you know, and you need to not give any permission to break that balance. You need to have boundaries drawn in terms of how you want to survive and then people will get that.

With grit and confidence in mind, participants confirmed that the career journey is extended and requires women to make life choices.

Participants also confirmed that the career path for superintendents is long. First the individual must be educated and serve as a teacher. That role is followed by school-based administration as a vice-principal and principal and then on to school-district leadership positions. Finally, the pinnacle of career success is the achievement of the top leadership assignment, or the superintendency. As noted, this career progression was endorsed by all of the participants. Mary summarized her experiences and what all participants described and felt:

I have been kicking around in the round in the realm of education for 30 plus years, serving in a number of capacities starting with teacher and principal and serving with . . . education for a while and then serving in some regional office positions then moving to deputy superintendent from about 2003 to 2011. And during that time there was a fair bit of flux within our district and so I was actually acting superintendent for four times, and then five years ago I became superintendent of the district, so officially I have served as superintendent for five years.

In summary, as participants reflected on their career progression, they clearly described the length of their career journey and how this was experienced as a barrier to a quick climb to a superintendency.

To highlight this life choice, one final description was when Ana also spoke to the length of her career journey combined with the choices she made:

I was surprised when I first became superintendent, somebody had asked, she was doing research and wondering the time frame. Like, it took me from becoming a

teacher to becoming a superintendent, and when I actually saw the number of years it took me to get there, I had to ask myself: Why did it take me so long? Well, number one, I moved, I raised a family, and we stayed in . . . and so that leaving and to go move to different places was not my family's priority, so we were staying in that community raising my kids.

The impact of the decisions women make, as a result of personal choice, was highlighted through the experiences described of all of the women superintendents in this study.

Even while women face emotional and lifecycle barriers, administrative barriers have also been experienced by women holding or aspiring to the K-12 school superintendency. Prior to achieving this top educational leadership role, the participants in this study described how the school board, their hiring policies and procedures, the impact of these individuals being elected officials, and the gender makeup of the board, often influenced success in obtaining a K-12 school superintendency.

Administrative Barriers

Not only is the superintendent responsible for instructional leadership, budgeting, strategic planning, and effective communication, but they also need political prowess (T. Wallace, 2015). As superintendents must also work closely with their hiring school boards, this research study found that three conceptual categories provided the foundation for this theme of administrative barriers. The three conceptual categories established within this theme are school board policies and procedures, the impact of the school board membership and elected officials, and the gender makeup of each board.

Policies and procedures. Even though all provincial school boards have policies and procedures that define their workings, procedures related to gender equity and hiring are not found in school board documents. No affirmative action policies were discovered through this research and only broad policies or procedures related to employment free of

harassment and bullying were discovered. In this regard, Debbie identified the lack of policy surrounding this issue and how it may or may not be problematic:

I really think it depends who you're working for. The superintendent is hiring or the board chair is hiring who has a preference over gender, and there aren't policies to negate that. You're going to get senior leadership that's going to reflect gender equity or not gender equity. Like I've definitely seen some women who I thought would be way better for the job and didn't get it.

While most superintendents did not indicate the need for policies and procedures, relative to hiring the superintendent, there was some discrepancy around the value these procedures may provide to aspiring women superintendents.

This finding was also addressed and expanded upon by what superintendent participants expressed related to a school board's lack of affirmative action policies.

Women superintendents, who identified this issue, described affirmative action as not being effective or desirable and were pleased that these policies are not endorsed. Leanne described her views on this matter:

I'm not an affirmative action fan. I don't want the job because I'm a woman. I want the job because I am the best person for it, and I think that's an important piece for all of us as well. Tokenism, I've never wanted any part of that. But if you've given me this because you think that, then I'm not interested.

Jeannie said:

I don't believe in affirmative action. I don't think you get where you want to go by saying you have to hire, you know, so many women or something. I don't think that works. I think part of it is the responsibility of people in leadership to really understand what leadership looks like, even if it's wearing a skirt. And really, to nurture it and to identify those people, and, say, look at what I see you do that impacts learning. And not, I really like you, or, you know, you work hard. None of that kind of stuff. The real professional side of it. I see that you know how to help nurture teachers to become better teachers and impact kids learning. I see that you know how to work with families to engage them in school. You know, those kinds of things.

Nonetheless, with no policies to guide the hiring of the superintendent, school boards are left to work with their provincial associations or to hire their superintendent on their own.

Elected officials. As school board members are not educators and often have little training relative to their elected role, participants described the potential disconnect between the work school boards are legislated to do and the hiring of the superintendent. Janet gave further detail around the relationship between the superintendent and the local school board:

I am their only employee, and, you know, you're dealing with multiple personalities: Some with good understanding of the education system and some learning it. I think, to me, that is a bit of a challenge because I'm in an educational role and being able to step out of it and see their perspective on how they see things, so that they have a good understanding. They're the face and the voice sometimes of our school division, and I find that can be challenging at times. Especially if they think they know what they're talking about and it comes back to me that they didn't. They have a different perspective and then righting that perspective. I also think that the nature of school boards in this province makes the situation worse, elected officials often with no background in educational leadership are making the choices for superintendent's and I think some men win the competitions where woman have more formalized education and leadership experience.

Debbie also described how, based on tradition, school boards are pre-disposed to hire male candidates.

It's, I think that, because it's boards who choose who select the superintendents, and again, boards vary with respect to background, and I would say that all else equal, many boards are inclined to hire the man because there's just some implicit assumptions that are made about that.

As described by all superintendents interviewed in this study, the development of this board-superintendent relationship is an important consideration when electing to apply for and to obtain the top educational position.

Jeannie identified further detail related to school board trustees not having a background in education. Every four years, when elections are held, new board members

may be voted into the position of school trustee (Alberta School Act, 2015; Education Act, 2015):

I also think that we work with publicly elected officials, and I understand that, but that's part of the volatility. Every election you have a new boss, and so you have to anticipate, and you have to manage upward all the time. Like, your boss should give you direction, but that's not how it actually works. If you don't give your boss, the collective good direction [laughing], you are in real difficulty. The nature of the job, and it's complicated by the fact that most, there's no qualification for boards. They just get elected. And there's no training for boards that's required either so you get this built in turmoil. Every election you could have a completely new board.

Therefore, as the hiring body or school board may change every four years, or at least some portion of the membership is often changed, the participants in this study revealed what they have both observed and experienced. The women described what they had experienced in the preferential hiring of men into the school district superintendent position. They wondered if these decisions were based on the gender makeup of the board.

Gender makeup of the board. As the only employee of the board, the hiring of the superintendent is a major responsibility of the locally elected board of school trustees (Alberta School Act, 2015; Education Act, 2015). One of the key challenges identified by current superintendents is the mindset and makeup of the hiring school board. Sandra identified the often-traditional mindset of board members, as well as possible reasons for the favored hiring of male candidates:

I think that, because it's boards who choose who select the superintendents, and again, boards vary with respect to background, I would say that all else equal, many boards are inclined to hire the man because there's just some implicit assumptions that are made about that.

Mary said:

I think it would play out from a perspective of, I think there's still within society some fairly traditional view points as to the male role. Right, and we know that it

is by in large a dominant role, so if your board of trustees hiring for a position what are you either overtly or subtly going to be looking for? What kind of leader are you going to be looking for? Right and I am not sure. It's really contingent upon the dynamic of you know that particular board.

Perhaps giving credence to being unaware of their gender biases, Jeannie also noted: "I just think that the people that are in empowered to make those decisions are probably unaware of their own biases."

As Jeannie also noted, the gendered makeup and mindset, regardless of the exact number of men and women board members, may also influence both the success and hiring of the K-12 school superintendent:

If you have a board of nine, and six of them are women and three are men, almost always those six women will give all kinds of messages to the men in the room that they are more important than the women. The way they listen to them, the positional authority that they hold. You know, the man is the chair of the board, for example. Or when then men speak everybody's quiet. When the women speak, the men sort of, tune out. Like, I think some of it is around that training those people who are making those decisions.

Overall, women participants suggested that the success of the school district superintendent does not rely solely on the mindset and makeup of the school board, yet as male preference is seen to be dominant, these aspects may play a role.

Mary summarized her thoughts on how the gender makeup of the board is just one piece of the puzzle. She indicated that it is the board members' ways of thinking relative to gender and leadership, which also plays into the hiring decision:

The board makeup does contribute to the success or failure of a superintendent carrying out their role on certain issues. For example, I would say that, there are times where I have to provide, what I label as way more research, relative to background or a decision that the board needs to make, then if I were to go in as a male superintendent, then say, well, you know, "Here's the issue before us and here's what I'm presenting." But they're fickle. I mean, there is a saying out there that superintendents use: "You're only as good as your last board meeting." Right, but what I find with this particular group is there is such an element of, it doesn't

take much to tip the trust scales. Right, and I'm not sure that they were ever balanced to start out with.

Tonnie took this one step further and described how this gendered mindset and way of thinking is impactful:

An example: applying for an administrative position. A male and a female. Both employed by the same jurisdiction, both the same environment, both started at the same time. One with a much more extensive resume and experience and qualifications but is overlooked because I believe the other person is seen as fitting the role better because of the gender. And that was obvious.

As a result of these noted experiences, it has been discovered that while the gender makeup of the board impacts the hiring of the superintendent, the board mindset and the development of the board-superintendent relationship is also critical. These elements were found to play an important role in a woman's successful climb up the educational career ladder.

As a matter of course, even though women participants indicated the required progression from teacher to superintendent, Jeannie also suggested that gender disproportionality may be more indicative of societal norms around male leaders and indicative of school board hiring and relationships:

I can think of superintendents in organizations where I've worked where either, they follow this sort of almost predictable pattern of many male superintendents. They were high school coach. They become the superintendent. They're used to that sort of coaching comradery. High profile. They're men. People see them as being leaders because they're charismatic or they've developed those kinds of skills. And I think a lot of women in this role, to get honest with you, I think many of them know much more than their male counterparts. Especially when they get the jobs. They often get the job later. They've worked longer. They've had more job experience. You know, it would be pretty rare to hear about a 30-year-old superintendent female superintendent. I still think there are people who get appointed because their friend is on the inside track. I do. I do. I'm not blind to that. . . And if you'll notice the majority of women who are serving in senior leadership in this province are not superintendents. They're deputies or associates. So that's disproportionately too.

Adding to what Jeannie described, Katrina also shared her observations related to superintendent hiring, male dominance, and the expectation that in one school jurisdiction, the male candidates would be favored:

There is a neighboring sort of jurisdiction, and they have an extraordinarily strong woman deputy or assistant superintendent. I don't know the title. And so strong, and strong for many years, and highly respected in all the communities; highly respected by admin, and she applied for a position and did not get it. And they have a history. I don't know if they've ever had a female superintendent and that just – I could never understand it. When you have someone of her standing, who was not considered, I do not get it.

A potentially traditional mindset of the hiring school boards has been shown to impact women superintendents and their bid to obtain this top educational position.

One final note regarding the hiring processes of the school board was highlighted by Sandra. As the school board is responsible for the hiring of the superintendent, the board members also determine compensation and conduct superintendent evaluations.

Sandra identified how inequities in the pay may also be the result of gender bias:

When I was superintendent in the rural district, I was in I was one of the lowest paid superintendents in the province. And we were one of the most understaffed jurisdiction offices in province. And I went on numerous occasions to, you know, trying to get you know at least average or pay increase. A very traditional board with mostly comprised of agricultural people and backgrounds and one year they would say to me, well, let's base it on your performance. And then when the performance came in over the top they, well, you know we can't. So, they sort of kept me low I guess, right, and I think that they didn't see. I mean my husband's a professional as well and think their attitude was you know, what does she need the money for? But it was more a matter of professional pride, right? What wasn't a surprise to me is the superintendent that replaced me that was male, the first thing they did was give him a significant increase in salary as soon as he started.

While not all women expressed this inequality, pay differences may be one example of how male preference in the superintendency is played out. Going beyond barriers, the next three themes discovered in this research relate to gender: gender norms, gender differences, and gender-specific mentorship and networking.

Gender Norms

Beliefs about gender and leadership remain predominant within today's society (Rhode, 2017; Shakeshaft, 2016). Women superintendents who were interviewed in this study concurred with these findings. The conceptual categories related to gender norms uncovered in this research study found that women are often misjudged and misunderstood, subjected to exclusionary behavior and exclusionary and demeaning language, and often told they are too emotional.

Misjudged and misunderstood. Several of the participants in this study indicated that they had experienced intimidation, not being listened to, and that they were misunderstood or underestimated. Laura described her experience of being underestimated in her interactions with others:

I don't think people outwardly say things, but I think there's an idea that, I always feel underestimated. Not only am I a female, but I'm a very small person. So, I'm barely 5 feet 2 inches, and so sometimes I get the feeling that I'm being underestimated. So, for example, one of my assistants is male and when we're in a conversation with, for example, the municipality for the county, the CEO will address the assistant with direct questions. And the assistant will look at me to answer. For me to answer, but the eye contact is with him. And, so it's not anything he (the Reeve) is saying and I don't think he's being outwardly rude. Like, I won't ask a female that question. I just think that's a cultural thing or something. That is, I don't think he's even aware that he is being, you know, maybe having a bit of gender bias.

While the feeling of currently being underestimated was experienced by women participants, Janet also described how she had been intimidated early in her superintendent career and how important it was for her to let others know how she felt:

So around that table there were some really strong individuals, superintendents who have probably been in, their whole career and have been around for quite a long time. It took me a while to, number one, not feel intimidated and when I got comfortable with the group I told them why and how I felt intimidated. You know, when I went to speak I would be interrupted. If I gave my opinion, it wouldn't even be acknowledged. That I'm from a small school division and from

a small zone, therefore I shouldn't have any authority around placing opinion into the group, and I expressed how I felt after I got comfortable enough. And I think they didn't realize that they were doing that.

Janet spoke of her resolve to let others know how she was feeling and of the intimidation she was experiencing. Ana connected intimidation and being underestimated in her leadership role. Ana's experiences summarized what many of the women participants identified:

I think our admin team is very respectful, in terms of my leadership, depending on the – 'cause right now our deputy is also a man and so I tend to see some of the men – this is going to sound terrible – some of the men gravitating to what he is proposing as opposed to what I am saying or, or if he provides his thinking or his suggestion, they gravitate towards what he's saying as opposed to what I'm saying right, so it's nice to have that balance.

Whether these experiences indicate intention or not, the result of intimidation and the feelings of being underestimated, left these women to feel they had been misjudged.

Exclusionary behaviors. Whether there is intent, and regardless of whether women are intentionally being intimidated by others, women are often excluded from male conversations and activities, and they are often being categorized as being overly emotional. Jenny spoke to the issue of male superintendents playing golf:

You know, all those quality childcare relationships you have, but just being a working mother generally, I think sometimes the skill set you need to where decisions are sometimes made, you know, like, I'm not a golfer, and I know a lot of decisions can be made on a golf course. I didn't have time to take five hours off to go golfing. And so consequently I didn't have, you know, I didn't have those skills or I didn't take those opportunities and probably those put me at a bit of a disadvantage sometimes. It's just, any of the functions that are bonding ones. Like for example, lots of male directors, you know, would have all their board over to their room.

Irene described how hockey linked men together for their social gathering with peers. In both cases, females were not included in the activities:

So, the guys all say, let's go out to a hockey game, right? So, all these guys are going out to play hockey, and the women, you know, don't necessarily, they aren't really interested in hockey, so they don't go. So, we do have a segregation kind of based on that.

The overriding sentiment of many of the women participants was that they were often left out of scheduled events and activities, perhaps, they pondered, because of their gender.

Regardless of the sport of golf or hockey, most women superintendents also described personal experiences where exclusionary practices and behaviors were evident. In response to exclusionary behaviors by her male counterparts, Pauline thinks "Don't forget, I'm still here," whereas Ana gave more detail surrounding meetings in which she experienced this behavior:

Well, when you go into a superintendents meeting, the men are all having their conversations, it's very difficult to get into the conversation I find. They've already come to a meeting and they've already designated where they're going to sit. Conversation, I would say, is shorter when it's a woman in a men's group, the men will dominate that conversation, sometimes I feel I'm more of a listener, and I'm just sitting back listening as opposed to being a participator or those opinions – the men's opinions are much stronger, in a conversation or have more, what's the word, let me think here – I'm being distracted by some of my kids here – It has more, it's more valid, I guess, is the word.

Leanne described her experiences and how she and other women have been excluded from social activities when at work related events:

There were seven of us but only two women and the men went off for weekend of fishing and golf, and then we all met up later for our strategic planning meeting, and the two women came along kind of thing. And then when we'd go out for, you know, a drink at conferences or whatever, they would do their thing. And I remember one in particular where it was, you know, you ladies, you go, go to the conference, go that first session here and get the notes. We're going to stay here. I said, no, that's not how this is going to happen. Now there might have been another woman that might have said, yeah, sure, I'll do that for you, but not this woman.

Adding to this issue of exclusion, Carol noted how, at times, she had been made to feel insignificant:

When we get into the larger professional group where we almost, from my feeling is, I become insignificant. My voice as a small jurisdiction becomes insignificant to the larger system around me. And I find too that I take my male counterpart that is on the reserve next to me, he's got a much greater voice. His deputy superintendent is also male, right?

Pauline too described experiences in which she was excluded from the pertinent conversations and felt unimportant:

They're talking about something else and then I just show up and they've already started. So, let's say we're talking about, well, the big thing we're working on right now is infrastructure, and I always feel that I'm always behind in conversation. Like, even with the people working at, Like, there's some conversation that I just miss. I don't know why. And I'm thinking they're happening in the bathroom because that's the only place I'm not with them.

The exclusionary behaviors described here and those exhibited by male colleagues and other men in their surroundings, gave women the feeling of being left out and not belonging to the group or team.

Exclusionary and demeaning language. Not only have many of these women experienced exclusionary practices, but some have also had demeaning language directed toward or about them. Laura described the words spoken by one of her former colleagues:

There was a good change because the fellow who had been here before had been in the regime where it was all men. He actually said, "I've got to get out the ovary office." You know, and he would make those comments very loudly at meetings of our professional organization meetings and in the community and it was kind of, a ha ha ha, and that was sad for me. So, when he retired I wasn't really sad because although he had a wonderful skill set it was destructive.

In support of this negative experience, and further being subjected to demeaning and negative language and behavior directed toward women, Tonnie also identified how this behavior and language impacted her during her climb to the superintendency:

I encountered some pretty nasty backlash in my previous life in a regular public jurisdiction. From various levels. I ran smack into the good ole boys club and, you

know, twice and was ceremoniously put in my place, if I can use that expression. It was a rude awakening and the experiences that I have at that time opened up a window, which I really would have rather have had remained closed. I was perfectly happy in my role as teacher, but then I was asked many, many times to let my name stand for the administrative position and that opened up a can of worms and forced me to see some processes that, within administration, that were not what I expected. In order to deal with that and make some sense out of it I enrolled in a master of education program and did the course work on women in administration in particular. That allowed me to move my experiences from the personal realm into the societal realm and to actually work it through my system and be able to move on. And I thought that that was the only way I could actually manage.

Overall, exclusionary and demeaning language was described as a challenge for women superintendents and those aspiring to the role.

Too emotional. In a number of cases, the women respondents/superintendents in this study identified how they are often described as being too emotional. This language and the interpretation given by women superintendents were often seen as negative.

Pauline identified this issue and how she has been accused of being too emotional:

You know, there's always that thing, like, with superintendents. I had a discussion with one of the superintendents and we were disagreeing and you know just the little comments he said in his emails. You know, kind of, not mean but he says, okay, talk to me when you're not as emotional. And I'm like, would you say that to a man? Like, I'm not emotional. I'm just questioning this decision that we're making, and as boards, and I'm questioning you. I'm not emotional.

When she was accused of being too emotional, Janet noted that she felt the need to “check her emotions” so she could ensure that her male counterparts listened to her views and ideas.

I also have learned over time, with my peers, with my superintendent peers, that I have to put my emotions on check. I think men are very uncomfortable when you're trying to make a point that's very valid and might suggest change and trying to—if you've got emotion in there, they write you off. And for me, as a woman, and I'm not sure about my peers who are women in this role if they feel the same way. You know, so I have been learning over time, and I'll probably retire before I got it down pat, but I've learned over time to keep my emotions in check. If I want to make a valid point, if I want to be listened to, then I have to

keep those emotions in check. When you start to get the heart of a situation, it's emotional. You're emotional.

Ana best summarized this issue of emotionality and how women are labeled differently than men, and therefore thought to be too emotional, perhaps even airheaded or moody:

Sometimes I guess when a woman is, when you're trying to be assertive, how it's perceived as different, I would say. Sometimes you're being assertive or you're standing very firm on an issue and people are giving you that feedback in terms of body language in terms of the look that – "Are you pms'ing?" Does that make sense? So that moodiness, I don't want to say, "I'm a moody person." However, if you stray away from your norm in terms of leadership, their reaction, their response, I think sometimes it's, they're starting to create their own sense in terms of why are you acting that way? So, labeling your behavior if it's out of the ordinary. So, say if you're being funny, and being humorous, sometimes they think you're being spinny, or airheaded if you're moody they relate back, that "Oh, it's that time of the month."

In summary, the impact of being told they were too emotional created a negative feeling for women superintendents and, in most cases, they described these experiences as sexist and demeaning.

In addition to the experiences women described, relative to these gender norms and the beliefs and behaviors of men, several of the participants in this study, also identified that other women had demonstrated negative behaviors, directed toward them. Jenny described her experiences over many years as a school district superintendent:

I've had my experience and I've had lots of it. Men are far easier to manage, deal with. Women often are jealous, vindictive. You may not hear this, but I'm telling you that it's part of the fabric of this. They don't often help each other out.

Many of the women participants described other females as being jealous and sometimes merciless toward each other. Tonnie expanded on this issue when she identified how women, who seek a top leadership position, often feel the need to adopt a different or male persona. This new persona may be one means to avoid being considered as too emotional:

To put it in plain language: I sometimes feel that females, in order to move into these higher-level positions will adopt behaviors and processes, you know, ways of doing things that are very much male.

Overall, while women may feel undermined and intimidated by both men and other women, are often excluded from conversations, and are often described as being overly emotional, it was also concluded by the women participants, that men and women lead differently. These gender differences were described by all participants in the study.

Gender Differences

Two conceptual categories form the basis for this theme of gender difference. Male and female leadership traits and stereotypes were found to be experienced by all of the superintendents who participated in this study.

Male and female leadership traits. Many of the women superintendents in this study suggested that men are more competitive and aggressive than women, while women are seen as relationship builders and are believed to be more collaborative. Mary summarized this difference in her description of how each gender leads differently:

I think a man in a crowd can stand up and say, "I'm the leader." I think a woman will say, "I'm a team member." Right, so, in terms of how we lead I'm not sure we are as overt, and I'm not saying this of all male leaders here, but I do think there are some elements that are slightly different in terms of how we lead. I would say that, you know, just speaking for myself here, but I would say that we find ways to build capacity and comprise where possible, whereas a male leader my experience would say, "No, here's how it's gonna go." Right, like it or not, here's how it's going to go. And I think rather than like it or not, we try to find ways to not necessarily because it's impossible right to have a win-win, but have more people in support of the decision.

All women superintendents described how they have experienced the different leadership traits demonstrated by men and women. Tonnie best summarized the thoughts of all women participants:

It's just the way of operating. You know there's a pattern of behaviors that I see in the vast majority of males within those positions of authority. That are quite different from the way that I operate as female in that same position.

The findings from this research study indicated that all women do see differences related to the gender of the leader.

Finally, when it comes to how each gender leads, Jeannie summarized that men and women lead differently and create relationships in different ways. Therefore, how each gender leads may have different implications for the school district superintendent.

Jeannie said:

I think what happens is that you know it's kind of like Carol Gulden's work that women's way of knowing and understanding. I think women are very relational and it matters to them to be part of the group and to support the group. When you listen to women talk about what brings them their greatest satisfaction at work a lot of them will talk about the relationships. The working relationships. The working with each other. How exciting it is when you know when someone as an idea and the three of you work on it and you bring it about. You hear a lot of that in the language of what they talk about. So, the kinds of things that men do to distinguish themselves or go for a job or to say, hey, pick me, I'm the best. Women see that a little bit differently than men do. I believe that. Women would see that as – I don't even know if it's jealousy. I don't know if we even need to put a negative slant on it. I think we can just say it's a little bit, hey, you know, like, where are you leading the team here?

In conclusion, all of the women participants indicated differences related to gender-specific leadership and the subsequent leadership traits that are often associated with both men and women.

Stereotypes. Regardless of how individuals of each gender lead, Sandra suggested that there is “still a way to go in terms of the generalization and stereotypes that go with leadership and that are attached to gender.” Sandra added that:

When we look at, you know, the stereotype of a leader in terms of you know the leader that is sophisticated or political or connects or has that persona, I think that the confidence all of those kinds of things they're still inherent in society. I think a learned inclination to see a man as a leader before they see a woman as a leader.

Based on the results of this research study, stereotyping and thinking in traditional ways continues to be observed by women superintendents.

Revealed through a focus group conversation, Katrina described what was both acknowledged and experienced by all participants; societal norms impact a woman's rise to the superintendent ranks:

I have seen it. I have seen, I have seen this not only in the selection process, but during the term of a superintendent, and I have heard conversations, and when we are superintendents we are not just dealing with boards, administrators, teachers other educators, we are dealing with the whole gamut of society, and so, yes, that is, I do believe that that is present.

In summation, throughout this research study it was found that both barriers and gender-specific challenges influence a woman's rise to the top educational position of superintendent. All participants indicated that while things have changed a little over time, there is one key element that was helpful to them as they moved up the educational career ladder. The key to success, the final theme, exposed through this research study, was described as a combination of gender-specific mentorship and networking.

Gender-Specific Mentorship and Networking

To increase the number of women in K-12 superintendencies, and to therefore bring about proportionality, women need to have the opportunity to be mentored (T. Wallace, 2015). Combined with networking, it is believed that women will be more successful in their tenure as a school district superintendent when they are engaged in effective mentoring relationships. The two conceptual categories of gender-specific mentoring and networking formed the foundation for the creation of this theme.

Gender-specific mentoring. All of the women participants in this study confirmed the value of the mentorship experience. Tonnie described how mentorship is essential to the success of a school superintendent.

It's absolutely necessary in my opinion, simply because that mentorship relationship is of extreme importance because it provides the support that safety net. It provides, it acts as a sounding board. It gives these young women an opportunity to interact, discuss, talk about issues and in the process, resolve issues, and gain confidence. It's like, I-have-your-back type of situation.

Pauline said:

And the mentor for me is the person that listens to me without telling me anything really. She just listens to me, and she'll question me, and then I'll figure it out. So, for me, that's very important.

In addition to the overall value of mentoring, as seen by current school superintendents and participants in this study, the issue of gender-specific mentorship was often described.

Most of the participants believed that woman-to-woman mentorship was ideal; however, they also confirmed that it is the strength of the mentoring relationship that is of most value. Ana spoke to her experience and belief related to gender-specific mentorship opportunities.

Well, I know that when I was first offered a mentor, it was a male. And there were two male offers, and I had requested for a female. And I just wanted to have that female perspective as opposed and being able to work. I had a sense that I wanted to be able to work with somebody where the male figures that they had suggested. I've only had a chance to observe and see them in different context, and I felt that I would, that male mentorship, which would [have] just probably been great, but it was my feeling that they were more top down and that's not my style, and I wanted to find somebody who was very close in terms of their leadership style and open to helping me [to] form my leadership, so I requested a female if that was at all possible.

Adding to this desire for a female mentor, Donna described how important it is for another woman's perspective and sharing of that mentor's past experiences, which were

optimal to a successful mentor-protégé relationship. When personal experiences related to gender bias were shared openly, she felt more comfortable in her superintendent role:

If you're a female and coming into the superintendency, and I see a whole lot more people in superintendents and assistant superintendents now than I ever saw before, there are some things that you're going to face and somebody needs to tell you. Well, it's just a gender bias. Somebody told me that at one time. I had been very hurt by something, I can't even remember what it was that they said and somebody said well that's a gender bias. That's their problem. That had a huge effect on liberating my thinking in terms of, oh, okay, well, if that's their problem well I can deal with it. So, I don't think it would hurt because there still is a significant amount of that.

Sandra concurred with these thoughts and the need for a gender-specific mentor. She added that it is important to be mentored by someone who has previously experienced or observed gender bias.

I do believe that there are some of those challenges that could be gender specific that might be less awkward to talk to with another female leader. Because you do get sometimes the gender traditionalists in other leadership roles in your district and you have to know how to deal with those.

Carol said:

If I had had a female mentor I think it would have made a difference for me. I think there are things that you know different discussions that could have been had, that I would have been able to have with a female superintendent as opposed to a male.

In all situations, the women in this study expressed the desire for some level of gender-specific mentoring to help guide them through the first stages of their superintendency.

While the numbers are lower for female superintendents, Katrina noted that she knew "lots of male mentors, but not as many females." This inequity may be indicative of the disproportionality of female superintendents, and as Jeannie noted:

I think the numbers tell us there's a gender issue. I think the numbers tell us there's a bias that operates. I mean, with the majority of people who in schools are female. It's, you know, somethings at work when the majority of people in

administration and senior leadership are male. That's not coincidental. I think its biases that people are just not aware of.

Still, and in support of gender-specific mentors, Janet reinforced this notion when she described how women work and lead:

Again, I think females have, we're mothers. Okay, and so in being a mom we have a different way to come at an issue than I think males do. I learned that when I was a teacher. I learned it when you know I was a principal and a vice principal. Like we just have a different way of approaching things. And some of my female peers in, principals, and even as senior admin who have not been, I see sometimes that they don't have that perspective. And it's more of a perspective of, I'm not going to solve your problem. But let's talk about your problem.

Nonetheless, some participants, including Janet, believe mentors of both genders would be helpful and in some cases more impactful. Jenny described this more fully:

I have the odd woman that I mentor too, but by far males are more open to this and are keener, and I don't know. But I really do think coaching and mentoring is the way to go. You know finding a local guide in your community and you know learning from them.

Overall, the participants in this study confirmed the value to be found in the mentoring relationship.

In summary, all women superintendents identified the importance of mentoring. They spoke of what they had accomplished and continue to achieve through these experiences of either being mentored or mentoring others. The overall finding from this study was that gender-specific mentoring is ideal, yet it is the development of the relationship, that is of the most value. This notion led some of the participants to conclude that multiple mentors of both genders would be value-added. Pauline summarized the thoughts and experiences of all of the participants:

It's basically that guiding. They're guiding me. They're also recommending reading materials to me. That I find really, like I don't always have times to research things, so I'll ask them, like I'd like to read up on this subject and they'll recommend some materials to me. So, I really appreciated that. Yeah. It's pretty

basic. Well for me the biggest thing is that getting to know that person. It takes time. And when it's a formal mentorship you have to take the time to do that. Like, just mentoring someone for knowledge for me is not enough. They need to know who I am. How I am. So, they can push me exactly the right way or question me the right way without feeling like I'm going to be angry if they ask me a difficult question. Because you know sometimes they do ask me difficult questions and on the fly, I'm like, why are you asking me this? And like, well, you know? Like, okay so, but we have that relationship of trust.

In conclusion, the impact of mentorship was seen to be of great value to all participants.

Connected to the mentorship experience, participants also found there is value and a need to embrace networking.

Networking. In addition to gender-specific mentorship opportunities, networking is also one way to build and grow relationships (Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011). These relationships provide women with opportunities to reach out to others and to gain confidence or grow their skills. Mary identified the need for a network:

I think you need a network. It doesn't have to be a huge network, but you need a network that you can reach out to when needed, right. So that would be my – if I had to do it all over again, that would be my first level is to ensure that there was the network, and the network is simply for those day-to-day or those organizational structure kind of aspects. And then from there the mentorship is very handy and then from there, the professional learning aspect of it, so that you can, in fact, the lead learner for the district which reaps the benefit of aligned leadership. And the other thing I think you really need is you need some insight into boards. And, you know, how they work and the dynamics, you need – how do I say this – you need really honest insight, not airy-fairy stuff, like, you know, here's your risk, and here's your reward. And, you know, depending on what decision you make here this could have a long-term implication or leave you vulnerable. Like you really, that whole eyes wide open piece.

Jeannie summarized the thoughts and endorsements expressed by all female superintendents when she indicated that there is value in both mentoring and in networking:

It's that somebody who really wants to help you succeed and can give you . . . it's almost like the formative feedback we do with students. Really precise stuff that encourages and helps people see and see their potential and see its impact on

students and help them understand that the reason it's important for them to see it is because they can help elevate the profession. They can help elevate how we work effectively with children. We need people like that and we need to be encouraging them.

All interviewees stated that the opportunity for mentorship and subsequently to network with other women must be encouraged. This idea was described through the words of Tonnie:

Those of us that have that inclination or that have that opportunity to do so need to encourage the younger females to be true to themselves and to push their limits and to go for you know, reach for their goals, reach for the stars and do it in their own way.

To fully grow their confidence and become even more successful in their careers, respondents indicated that networking and mentoring provide a value that is necessary for all women superintendents and for those aspiring to the top K-12 leadership position.

In summary, the theme of mentoring and supporting others in like roles is one aspect that may support the gender balance within the top educational positions in K-12 education. As Bearman et al. (2010), Carr (2012), Rath (2012), and Rhode (2017) noted in their journal articles, the value of mentorship relationships and most often, gender-specific mentoring experiences, as well as the building of networks, is one way to enhance gender proportionality. All participants endorsed this idea.

Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, the findings from interviews with 14 superintendents, followed by two focus group conversations, and the examination of written documentation were identified. Use of a qualitative multiple explanatory case study approach, to examine the phenomenon of gender disproportionality in K-12 superintendencies, allowed for the collection of data and the subsequent data analysis. In

response to the four research questions that guided the study, it was discovered that all female superintendents within these two cases have experienced gender disproportionality in a similar manner. These similarities included six themes; three of these themes were identified as barriers faced by women in these two cases: (a) emotional barriers, (b) lifecycle barriers, and (c) administrative barriers, and three gender based themes: (d) gender norms, (e) gender differences, and (f) gender-specific mentoring and networking. There were no differences in the findings between cases.

In the next chapter, a review of the findings presented in this chapter are summarized, conclusions presented and discussed, the application of this study to the problem statement clarified, the application of these findings to leadership discussed, recommendations for further action described, recommendations for further research identified, and a concluding statement delivered.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Research studies have shown that although women make up 86% of the teaching force, when it comes to the top educational leadership position or the superintendency, only 20% of those positions are filled by females (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Dowell & Larwin, 2013). The purpose of this explanatory multiple case study was to understand how current K-12 school superintendents, in two Canadian provinces, have experienced gender disproportionality in their leadership roles. In addition, by obtaining these firsthand experiences and learning about the barriers of those currently in the senior leadership role, aspiring female superintendents may be advantaged. To learn of these experiences and gather the applicable knowledge, this study was guided by four research questions that were crafted based on the literature reviewed and in consultation with the dissertation chair:

1. How do female superintendents experience gender disproportionality in two Canadian provinces?
2. What effect, if any, does gender disproportionality have on the female superintendents in these two provinces?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of disproportionality between the female superintendents in these two provinces?
4. What factors do the female superintendents attribute to gender disproportionality in their provinces?

Data from two Canadian provinces, and therefore results of two case studies, were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 14 women superintendents. In addition to this means of data collection, two focus groups were conducted, and pertinent documents

were examined. As the data were collected, a constant comparative technique was used to code and subsequently analyze the obtained information. This data analysis included line-by-line coding, the creation of conceptual categories, and finally key themes were established. Chapter 4 described the findings from both case studies, and as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Yin (2014) have noted, the analysis and narrative that follows builds upon the abstractions and fits for both cases. The aforementioned issue of gender disproportionality and the experiences of 14 women were described in Chapter 4.

Following this introduction, Chapter 5 is structured into six key areas related to gender disproportionality in two Canadian provinces. These areas include: (a) a discussion and analysis of the findings and conclusions, (b) the application of findings and conclusions related to the initial problem statement, (c) how the findings apply to leadership, (d) recommendations for action, (e) recommendations for further research, and (f) a concluding statement.

Discussion

The data gathered through this study were guided by four research questions. Responses to each of these four research questions and relevant conclusions are based on the six previously described themes. Therefore, the next section of this chapter is organized around the four research questions and the conclusions drawn from the findings, and they are based on the themes that emerged from this study and how these findings are supported by the research. Finally, while several of these themes and the findings from this study may be more specifically related to one of the research questions, there remains a cross-over and threads of each theme can be found within all of the questions.

How do Female Superintendents Experience Gender Disproportionality in Two Canadian Provinces?

The first research question relates to gender disproportionality and how the experiences of female superintendents were described. While the majority of teachers are female, males continue to dominate the K-12 educational leadership landscape. As noted earlier, researchers have discovered that the 86/13, female to male ratio, at the teaching level, is close to the opposite, with a 20/80 ratio of female to male superintendents (Burton & Weiner, 2016). Therefore, how women superintendents have experienced this problem of gender disproportionality in their roles, led to two key areas being revealed. It was discovered that all women superintendents experienced the influences created from both gender norms and gender differences.

Gender norms. As a result of what has been described as norms related to gender, the women in this study described how they are often misjudged and misunderstood, excluded from male-determined activities, and were often told that they were too emotional. It was also revealed that traditional thinking, relative to male preference in leadership, was experienced through both unacceptable behaviors and language, which was demonstrated by male and female colleagues and board members. Therefore, based on what has been a traditional division of labor, women's roles and the gendered belief that females cannot do the work of a school district leader often leaves women seeking those roles in a position of disadvantage (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Moorosi, 2016; Oram-Sterling, 2016). Women in this study experienced this gender-biased behavior, which has led to gender disproportionality in the senior educational leadership role.

To explain this, the findings from this study revealed that women superintendents were often subjected to this traditionalist approach to thinking. As they identified their experiences with unwanted behavior, they noted that these actions and behaviors have a foundation in traditionalist views and thoughts. This unwanted behavior was described by the participants as they shared their experiences of being ignored and left out. Often, they noted that their male assistants were included in the conversations, and yet they, as women, were ignored. In essence, the women participants went on to describe how the males were often acknowledged, even when the female was the actual superintendent.

These actions further played out as the participants' views were often seen to be of limited value. As a result, these actions, which excluded women from both conversations and activities in either small or large group settings, were experienced based on what women described as gender bias, and one noted reason as to why gender disproportionality continues to exist in the K-12 leadership environment.

The findings from this study uncovered how language usage affects men and women differently. Within this study, several women experienced demeaning language directed toward them. One example of this was when a male assistant, to a woman superintendent, spoke of the "ovary office" when referring to the woman superintendent's workplace. Therefore, depending on the words used, the tone of voice, and the underlying language choice, male dominance is often demonstrated, which, in turn, leads to a difference in the interactions between the genders, and further supports the unequal distribution of power (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Gaucher et al., 2011). Consequently, based on linguistics and word choice, the issue of gender disproportionality, in current male-dominated and unequitable leadership distributions, is promoted.

Women also expressed dissatisfaction when they were underestimated or felt that their voices were insignificant. These matters were often referred to as women being too emotional. Emotion however, is necessary for educational leaders, yet when the women showed it, they often experienced criticism and were left out. Still, as this ability to show emotion has been described as a skill necessary for leaders, effective leaders, must communicate through both verbal and nonverbal emotion (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

As Blackmore (2010) noted, emotions have been found to be gender related, linked to identity, and consequently based upon the preconceived notions that individuals hold of how they see themselves as leaders. These preconceived notions, about gender and leadership, are connected to traditionalist thinking and continue to promote gender disproportionality (Blackmore, 2010; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). In summary, to be identified as being too emotional was found to be a negatively imposed belief and one that may continue to reinforce gender disproportionality in the K-12 superintendency.

In addition to the experienced negativity, at times coming from men, some women also described that other women may be viscous and destructive in their actions and their language directed toward them. Undermining actions and behaviors were found to have been experienced and observed by many of the study participants. The research supports this notion; women are not always supportive of other women and this behavior may subsequently influence moves from a central office position to that of a superintendent (Sampson et al., 2015). This lack of support, and sometimes negativity from other women, does not support a desire for more women to enter the superintendent ranks, therefore leaving the issue of disproportionality unresolved (Sampson et al., 2015).

Gender differences. In addition to the aforementioned traditionalist gender norms and beliefs, often found to be ingrained in daily work environments, the findings of this study also revealed that men and women lead differently. The gendered leadership experiences described by women superintendents, and thus linked to gender disproportionality, was discovered when women superintendents indicated how they had observed and experienced some men as being more aggressive in their leadership approaches. On the other hand, participants described women as more collaborative and team players. The superintendents in this study all indicated that men and women lead differently, and coupled with traditional thinking and gender norms, this action may be one reason for the fewer number of women holding superintendencies. In support of the findings from this multiple case study, researchers, too, have noted that traditional paradigms and beliefs often identify men as more competitive, dominant, and hierarchical, as compared to women, who are seen to be collegial, reflective, and caring (Carr, 2012; Crites et al., 2015; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). Within this study, women superintendents who experienced this issue, concluded that this may be one reason why gender disproportionality continues to exist in the K-12 school district environment.

What Effect, if Any, Does Gender Disproportionality Have on the Female Superintendents in These Two Provinces?

The second research question is related to the effects of gender disproportionality on women superintendents. The primary effects of gender disproportionality, to be discussed in this portion of Chapter 5, include those things that impacted women superintendents after they had obtained the position of K-12 senior educational leader. Administrative barriers and the experiences of gender-specific mentoring and networking

were found to be impactful when looking at the effects of gender disproportionality on female superintendents.

Administrative barriers. Participants described that once they were hired, each must demonstrate the ability to work with her elected board representatives. Not only must the new superintendent learn what her role is, but also learn how to work within the context of an elected board (Boyland, 2013; G. Brown & Irby, 2016; Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2013; Thompson, 2014; J. Wallace et al., 2014). Adding to this political conundrum and to how best to work with the board, although it is the same for both genders, the women participants noted that it is the responsibility of the superintendent to carry out the board directives. In isolation, this challenge was found to be one that could be overcome, but as personal experiences were described, participants noted how new and impending political changes related to elections, impacted their work and many earlier-determined board directives. This challenge ultimately influenced and affected the relationship between themselves and the board.

This barrier was identified by many of the participants when they described how often this change may occur. As board elections take place every four years, new board members may influence the previously established directions of the board and present different challenges. This difficulty was seen to effect gender disproportionality because as board membership changes, a direction toward male bias in leadership had been observed and may continue to be uncovered. This gender bias was therefore one challenge and an area of concern for superintendents who are already hired into the role.

In consideration of the gender disproportionality found in the superintendent ranks, it was also discovered that in at least one noted instance, the superintendent was paid a lower salary than her male counterparts. Following her choice to move to another position, the newly hired male superintendent was given a salary higher than what she previously had been awarded. While not supported by all of the respondents, research has indicated that this remains an issue for female superintendents (Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Javdani, 2015). Javdani (2015) noted that as females do face glass ceilings and glass doors, which were described earlier in Chapter 2, these difficulties ultimately lead to women being compensated at a lower level than men. Nonetheless, as Derrington and Sharratt (2009) pointed out, women must learn to negotiate and set boundaries with their school boards. Perhaps, participants noted, it is valuable to take steps to further negotiate their salaries and speak up; this may be one important action for women to act upon and perhaps then help to lessen the gender disproportionality found in K-12 school districts.

It has also been noted that board members lack formal training in education and further, that their role is political in nature. Women superintendents described this lack of training for board members and how when elections take place every four years, membership can change. Women described how these changes were factors, not only in how relationships altered, but also on what they needed to present to the board. Women indicated that they had to show their boards both more statistics and give far more detail than was required of their male counterparts. Research has supported this macro-level gender leadership challenge as being a difficulty for women (Diehl & Dzubinski,

2016). In summary, administrative barriers specific to the gender makeup of the board, their political affiliations, and changing membership was one effect deemed as influential in retaining gender disproportionality in K-12 school superintendencies.

Gender-specific mentoring and networking. In addition to the experiences and effects of gender disproportionality, all women in this study indicated that they had experienced some form of mentoring. They also described the need for gender-specific mentorship opportunities. Mentoring and networking opportunities with other women, are seen as extensions to professional learning, an important element for women who are planning to advance their careers (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Bowser et al., 2014; Bynum, 2015; Carr, 2012; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Sampson et al., 2015; Searby et al., 2015; Suseno et al., 2007). Within this study, for those who had experienced the option of having a mentor, the experiences were seen as positive. Where the connection was not strong and if they were able to request another mentor, they were also pleased. In this way, gender-specific mentoring pairings were often found to be of most value. Through this aspect of career enhancement, and through network and mentoring circles, the organization too will find benefit when having access to feminine leadership skills (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Suseno et al., 2007). Overall, the experiences of women superintendents, relative to gender-specific mentoring and networking were not only discovered in both cases, but endorsed by all participants.

As T. Wallace (2015) pointed out, same-gender mentoring relationships also allow for personal support, particularly when gender biases are being experienced. Therefore, while most of the participants viewed gender-specific mentorship as the ideal, some also identified that it is the person and their characteristics—as well as the

relationship—that makes the difference. One suggestion was that a balance of both male and female mentors was optimal. To have multiple mentors is one way to obtain diverse perspectives (Searby et al., 2015). Perhaps, as some women suggested, the issue of disproportionality will be lessened when multiple perspectives are garnered from both genders and more specifically when gender-specific mentoring relationships are established.

What Are the Similarities and Differences in the Experiences of Disproportionality Between the Female Superintendents in These Two Provinces?

There were no discernable differences between the experiences, effects, and factors described by women superintendents in either of the two provinces. Each of the women superintendents who participated in this study shared their stories, described their lived experiences, and identified observations in much the same manner. While the provinces differ, the role is the same, legislation is similar, and still the issue of disproportionality remains unresolved.

What Factors Do the Female Superintendents Attribute to Gender Disproportionality in Their Provinces?

The fourth research question was structured in a manner that would discover factors that may be attributed to gender disproportionality. While question two noted the effects of gender disproportionality after women had obtained a K-12 superintendent position, this research question was meant to find out what factors, or which challenges and blockages women face, when choosing to become a school superintendent. In response to this question, factors were found to include emotional barriers, lifecycle barriers, including support from family and life choices made by women, and the ability

to obtain an advanced degree. While these factors were often found to be based on a woman's choice or decision, administrative barriers and gender-specific mentoring and networking opportunities were also discovered to be influential factors for women advancing to the top educational leadership position.

Emotional barriers. Fear was experienced by women superintendents; women fear rejection, failure, criticism, and they lack self-confidence. The negative perceptions and fear, relative to their own ability to do the work of the superintendent, was experienced by a number of women participants prior to obtaining a superintendent position. Not to negate the fear also experienced by men, facing their anxiety and therefore lessening the fear factor is essential to success as women climb up the leadership ladder (G. Brown & Irby, 2012). Still, the overall negative self-perceptions of women in this study and their fear of the responsibilities associated with the superintendency were found to be instrumental when and if a woman chose to apply for a superintendent position. While Dye (2016) indicated that fear cripples all human beings, in terms of leadership, her research has confirmed the finding that women often choose to opt out of applying for a top educational position both as a result of poor self-confidence and a fear of the unknown aspects of an unfamiliar position. As noted in articles by Kagoda (2016) and Sui Chu Ho (2016) these findings were reinforced. When women do opt out of superintendent positions as a result of emotional barriers, the issue of gender disproportionality in school district leadership, is expected to continue.

Lifestyle barriers. In addition to the emotional barriers female superintendents described, as they relate to gender disproportionality, all of the women superintendents noted how family responsibilities not only lengthened their journeys to becoming a

superintendent, but they often put their careers on hold to take on childcare and other home responsibilities. These same experiences, and therefore factors that influence the lack of proportion in the superintendent role, have been noted by researchers who found that the creation of a balance between work and family was often hampered by expectations at home, therefore creating a barrier to overcome (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2014). Findings have shown that gender proportionality is negatively impacted when women choose not to apply for school superintendencies.

This finding, or concern relative to family responsibilities, coupled with the factor of how difficult it can be for women superintendents to obtain a master's degree, influenced the possibility for a woman to move to a superintendent position. This factor was primarily experienced early in women's careers and where they resided in rural or remote areas of their province. Still, to create proportional gender representation in the superintendency, women participants noted how important it is to provide access to advanced education.

To provide equal opportunities for women to enroll in a master's program, universities must extend beyond city borders and create access for women in rural areas (Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011). The use of technology, participants suggested, may be one means by which to allow equal access to women who are also raising families and taking care of their family responsibilities. Equal access to technology, which could lead to the achievement of a master's degree, was described as one factor that has, and may continue to, positively influence and bring about some gender proportionality. As education levels increase and experiences accumulate, gender barriers may be broken down and more women may strive for and be rewarded with the top educational position

(Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). When equal access to advanced education becomes the norm, it may be that the proportional representation of women in top educational leadership positions will become balanced.

Administrative barriers. The results of this study, further confirmed by past research, revealed that school boards are responsible for hiring their single employee, the superintendent (Alberta School Act, 2015; Education Act, 2015). Since no policies or procedures were found relative to hiring based on gender, there are no written documents to influence the hiring of the superintendent. The gender makeup and mindset of the board, however, combined with board members lack of training in the educational realm, did factor into the problem of gender disproportionality in K-12 school districts. The gender makeup of school boards, tied to traditionalist views of men and women leaders, was seen as one factor that may influence the hiring of women into superintendent roles. This action may influence the proportionality of women in these top-level educational leadership roles. Women superintendents, in this study, often found that the factor of gender bias, based on the different gender makeup and constant change to board membership, may be detrimental to the hiring and continued success of females.

While Boards may work with provincial school board bodies, the individual members themselves have no experience in education; they are locally elected politicians with little training in their role. The board hires at their own discretion. This action, combined with their often-male preference for leadership, was seen as one factor that hinders a woman's rise to the top K-12 leadership position. Combined with possible gender bias and the changing of the board membership, most boards are still found to be male-dominated (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Yet, while the dominance of males on school

boards was not confirmed by all of the study participants, male-dominated school boards was suggested as one factor for why male leaders are chosen over females and the issue of gender disproportionality continues to be unresolved in Canadian school districts.

Gender-specific mentoring and networking. Similar to the description of experiences identified by women superintendents and described relative to question two, mentoring and networking are seen, by all women participants in this study, as a key component leading to success. As was previously noted, women need mentorship relationships and more specifically, gender-specific mentoring connections. Yet, as there are often not enough women in the superintendent ranks to accommodate all those who wish to have a female mentor and from whom to seek guidance, the lack of female role models and mentors is a difficulty for women to overcome.

As previously noted, the impact of gender disproportionality is detrimental to creating proportionality within the superintendency. While the numbers have fluctuated over the past years, and research has shown that there have been some shifts in the number of women in senior leadership roles, the overall percentage of females, compared to their male counterparts, remains status quo (Rhode, 2017). As discovered in this study, and following a review of the literature, researchers have noted that women are seen as being more suited to human relations rather than higher profile positions (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Rhode, 2017). While not extensively examined, the female participants in this study noted that more women now occupy middle-level leadership positions than in the past. The number of women achieving assistant or deputy superintendent positions has increased. Still, the disproportionate number of men in superintendent roles outnumbers those positions held by women (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Searby et al., 2015;

T. Wallace, 2015). Overall, women who seek to achieve a superintendency and who need encouragement and guidance will be best served by women currently in superintendent roles. To bring about gender proportionality, gender-specific mentoring and networking were acknowledged by the women in this study, as being essential to success as a K-12 senior educational leader.

In summary, while the current situation is that women occupy less of these top superintendent leadership positions than men, Pankake and Muñoz (2012) have suggested that when school districts change to organizations that are more collaborative, it may be that the characteristics of women leaders will be more sought after. Currently, while this was not expressed as a comprehensive and supported strategy, the essence of this description is indicative of what the participants shared as a fundamental change needed to bring about gender proportionality in the K-12 senior educational leadership ranks.

Application of Findings Relative to the Problem Statement

As previously noted, the number of women teachers, compared to those who become superintendents, is disproportional. In an American study, Burton and Weiner (2016) noted that 86% of the teaching force is female, while only 33% have become superintendents. Therefore, the general problem addressed in this study was the noted gender disproportionality in leadership positions, particularly in the role of the K-12 superintendent. This finding regarding the lack of gender proportionality, which does not represent the general or educator populations, was also found to be true in the two Canadian provinces that were studied. Overall, the findings from this study confirmed the problem as presented.

In this study, the research questions were structured to learn of the experiences of women superintendents, identify the possible effects gender disproportionality has on these women, find similarities and differences within the two cases, and finally to learn of the factors attributed to gender disproportionality in the K-12 superintendency. To find answers to the research questions and subsequently, to help solve or lessen the impact of the presenting problem, five recommendations are presented later in this chapter.

Prior to presenting these five recommendations, it is relevant to note that similarities were experienced by all of the participants and that no differences were revealed. Therefore, it is expected that leaders may find it advantageous to share these findings with their boards, their staffs, and all individuals who want to shift the status quo and move to a gender balance within the superintendent ranks. One example of how sharing is viewed as important was described by Donna, as she herself, chose to share, with her staff, pertinent information relative to gender disproportionality:

I brought down for them the statistics of how many teachers are female. Right from kindergarten to Grade 12, and how many teachers are principals and vice principals and then how many are assistant superintendents and superintendents. And I brought them that data because I wanted to show them that a superintendent is a teacher that has just changed jobs and gone in a different direction. A principal is just a teacher who has taken on a different responsibility within the school. But if I look at the vast majority of our teachers are female it should stand to reason that the vast majority of our principals and assistant superintendents and superintendents are female. And yet that's not really the case and why wouldn't it be in field that is dominated by females. Why would there not be that proportion in the leadership?

This description of how one woman has taken action is one step toward solving or lessening the problem of gender disproportionality in the K-12 school superintendency. If all leaders shared knowledge and statistics, and the findings relative to experiences,

effects, and factors found in this research, the thinking of others may change, and learning will take place.

Bartee (2012) and Riley (2013) noted that educational leaders who seek balance and proportion need to engage in effective and strategic communication while also paying attention to the building of strong relationships. It is this knowledge sharing that will help strengthen these existing relationships and further enhance the collective wisdom and understandings of the problem. In addition to the importance of sharing the knowledge and growing wisdom, researchers have shown that the problem of gender disproportionality is discriminatory (Schuh et al., 2014). Gender disproportionality is an ethical issue that, if not acted upon, will fortify the unequal distribution of men and women in top leadership positions (M. E. Brown & Treviño, 2014; Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013, Rhode, 2017; Schuh et al., 2014). In summary, by sharing knowledge, building stronger relationships, and paying attention to disproportionality as an ethical issue, these actions may help shift the balance and lessen the gender disproportionality of K-12 school superintendents.

Application to Leadership

Leadership is defined as a social, relational, and collective practice (Blackmore (2010, p. 642). Leadership experts, Kouzes and Posner (2012) suggested that leaders must be honest, forward looking, inspiring, and competent. Rhode (2017) added to this description when she noted that through effective policies and practices, organizations must determine how best to ensure equal access to leadership positions. Translating these leadership descriptors into the K-12 school district environment, the top educational leaders or superintendents must not only possess these noted leadership traits, but they

must also be adept with their communication strategies. Educational leaders must be effective in the areas of budgeting, policy implementation, strategic planning, and political prowess; they must be solid decision makers and strong instructional leaders (Björk et al., 2014; Marzano & Waters, 2009; T. Wallace, 2015). To build on gender proportionality, all of these characteristics will need to be demonstrated by females striving to obtain top positions.

The superintendents who were interviewed for this study confirmed the importance of these previously noted characteristics and the strengths deemed necessary for the for K-12 school superintendent. Based on the findings of this research, although women were found to reflect these traits, they were often unsuccessful in their bid to achieve the superintendency or they were hindered along the way. Therefore, it is important for school district officials, superintendents and their professional organizations, and those interested in leadership and gender proportionality, to learn from these findings. To engage in conversations and to strategically plan for gender proportionality is the next step in the journey to promote gender balance. As barriers and gender biases impact women in top educational leadership positions, there are recommendations that may help more women achieve their leadership goals. These recommendations to alleviate the barriers and to support proportional representation for women in the superintendency are described in the next section of this chapter.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the data resulting from this explanatory multiple case study research, five recommendations are suggested. Each of these recommendations has implications for both current and aspiring K-12 school superintendents, as well for the hiring school

boards and professional organizations. To combat the barriers and gender challenges influencing women superintendents or those aspiring to the role, five recommendations for action include: (a) to self-assess and continuously examine personal strengths and achievements, (b) to ensure that gender-specific mentoring and coaching opportunities are available, (c) to provide networking opportunities for women in the K-12 educational environment, (d) to offer gender-related training for school board members, and (e) to identify and encourage future women leaders by delivering appropriate training for new and aspiring female superintendents.

Self-Assessment and Monitoring

For women to advance their careers and to obtain a K-12 superintendency, one area of growth is to first assess the individual woman's readiness for the superintendency, and for her to become aware of both her strengths and areas for growth. While women often choose to wait until later in their careers to position themselves for a superintendent assignment, a pre-application readiness and self-assessment strategy may be helpful (G. Brown & Irby, 2012). This assessment, combined with a career plan, in which the individual continuously researches and becomes an expert in educational practices, has been found to be effective for self-growth (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Pankake & Muñoz, 2012). It has been shown that to intentionally engage in self-reflection, women need to change stereotypical thinking about self-imposed barriers and negative self-perceptions (Coleman, 2012). Through this self-assessment opportunity, and as women see themselves as capable senior leaders, gender disproportionality may be lessened.

In summary, by building confidence through knowing her desired career goals and the creation of a career plan, success will be more likely (G. Brown & Irby, 2012).

Still, to supplement a woman's learning and to enhance her self-growth, it may be of value to tie this recommendation to the opportunity to obtain mentoring. Mentoring has been shown to be a strong precursor to success in the school superintendency (T. Wallace, 2015).

Gender-Specific Mentorship

While one challenge faced by women has been to find appropriate mentors, this second recommendation is to create gender-specific mentorship programs. Providing ample time and crafting appropriate pairings was discovered to be effective for school district leaders. Gender-specific mentorship relationships have been found to produce optimal results (Searby et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, as Rhode (2017) and Searby et al. (2015) suggested, in male-dominated environments, women are often left out of mentorship circles and subsequently lack this type of professional learning. As there are fewer women to mentor those entering the superintendency, and since there remains a strong need and desire for women to be mentored and thus achieve career advancement opportunities, a clear plan for gender-specific mentorship opportunities is recommended (Ellerson, 2016; Liu McNeice-Stallard, & Stallard, 2015; T. Wallace, 2015). In an effort to support women through mentorship opportunities, this recommendation is for professional organizations, of which all superintendents are members, is to create formal gender-specific mentorship programs. These mentorship programs may then lead to gender proportionality in K-12 school district superintendent positions.

Without these effective mentorship programs, and if ample time and effective relationships are not able to be created, less than favorable experiences will result (Carr,

2012; Ellerson, 2016; Rhode, 2017). A comprehensive, well thought out, and well-resourced mentorship program will prove to be most effective (Bynum, 2015). This second recommendation for professional organizations to create gender-specific mentorship programs that will allow individuals to select the mentor of their choice and to ask for an alternate mentor if the relationship is not workable. While this formal mentorship approach is deemed to be favorable, many women may also wish to engage in informal mentorship relationships. These informal connections, coupled with formal mentoring, also provide value as mentorship is a means to provide equity and opportunity (Bearman et al., 2010; Rath, 2012; Rhode, 2017; Searby et al., 2015; Sperandio, 2016). In summary, it has been discovered that women need mentors with whom they can connect. These mentors may be of both genders, yet gender-specific mentoring relationships are of most value to aspiring and current female superintendents (Bearman et al., 2010; Rath, 2012; Rhode, 2017).

Gender-Specific Networking

A third recommendation is for gender-specific networking to be implemented. It has been found that while formal mentorship opportunities are of value, there is also evidence to show that informal mentoring and networks provide women with opportunities to obtain advice, to grow their contact lists, and to both observe and follow successful role models (Rhode, 2017). Women who engage in networking and take part in networking events and conversations are better able to focus on ways to overcome the barriers earlier presented (Carr, 2012; Coleman, 2012; Ellerson, 2016; Oram-Sterling, 2016; Rhode, 2017). G. Brown and Irby (2012) suggested that the creation of a solid and effective network leads to success when women engage in numerous networks, get

involved, make presentations and publish articles, engage in a mentoring relationship, and never burn bridges. To bring about balance and create more proportionality at the superintendent level, it is recommended that gender-specific networking opportunities be created and made available to all current and aspiring superintendents.

Gender-Related Training for School Boards

To provide gender-related training for school boards is a fourth recommendation that surfaced from this study and the literature review presented in Chapter 2. Duevel et al. (2015) endorsed this intention while they noted that both men and women need to understand differences and accept their responsibilities. Through applicable and relevant gender-related training, the establishment of an inclusive culture will promote value and real change (Coleman, 2012; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). Training opportunities made available to school board members, may also be translated into training for all school district staffs. School districts promote professional development opportunities, often related to student learning and achievement, and yet there is often less talk about building an inclusive leadership culture related to gender. Coleman (2012) and A. Cook and Glass (2014) suggested that a culture of diversity needs to include training in gender and leadership for diversity.

In addition to the training about gender differences, there is also a need to educate school board members related to hiring practices and the promotion of equal opportunities for K-12 female superintendent applicants (Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011). When this recommendation is acted upon, a better understanding of difference in gender and in leadership styles will surface, and perhaps lead to more gender proportionality, relative to the general and educator populations.

Identification, Encouragement, and Training

T. Wallace (2015) identified the need to provide encouragement to females ready to enter the superintendent ranks and to ensure that universities prepare females for the superintendency. Not only did some study participants suggest that gender-specific training would be valuable, but this was confirmed by the research. University programs that identify leadership and gender issues promote awareness and build capacity for future generations (K. L. Brue & Brue, 2016; Duevel et al., 2015; Kachur-Reico & Wallin, 2011). These opportunities lead to the final recommendation to arise from this study, to allow for and provide encouragement for those aspiring to become superintendents.

Earlier, the identified recommendation to create mentoring opportunities for current and aspiring superintendents was described. As Muñoz et al. (2014) discovered, if early mentorship relationships are not created and this aforementioned encouragement not provided, a woman's positive perception of self will be restricted. Essentially, without encouragement and training, tied to mentorship, a woman's career journey will be incomplete (Muñoz et al., 2014).

In conclusion, if these results are shared and the recommendations acted upon, a gender balance may be extended in the K-12 school superintendency. Professional organizations, school boards, school district leaders, and those aspiring to the top leadership position may be influenced and impacted by changes produced from: self-assessment; mentoring and networking opportunities; and actions of encouragement and training. As noted earlier in this chapter, it will be important to share these research

findings and consider how these suggested recommendations may support gender proportionality in the K-12 superintendency.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this research study have confirmed that gender disproportionality in the K-12 superintendency is an issue in two Canadian provinces. The literature has shown that this issue is broad in scope; upon examination of the research, it was found that the issue is prevalent in the United States, Canada, and around the world. To extend the learning about the lack of gender proportionality in school districts and more specifically to identify the reasons why it has not been achieved, future research may continue to shed light on the problem.

Several key areas for future research include:

- To examine established mentorship programs, while also examining the impact these programs have on bringing about gender proportion in senior leadership roles.
- To investigate how coaching, networking, and alternative support strategies impact women aspiring to obtain a top K-12 leadership position.
- To explore the different leadership styles of men and women, while also understanding how these styles impact and deter women from obtaining superintendent positions.
- To explore how universities are using technology to allow equal access to women in remote and rural areas.
- To examine the gender-related content of leadership preparation programs within both universities and professional organizations.

Concluding Statements

This dissertation examined the disproportionality of women superintendents in two Canadian provinces. Based on the findings from this research study and a review of the pertinent literature, it was found that similar experiences influence all female superintendents. Emotional, lifecycle, and administrative barriers, as well as gender related themes of norms, differences, and gender-specific mentoring and networking, were found to be key themes that told the story of how women are still living and working within the realm of gender disproportionality, particularly in the K-12 educational leadership environment.

While the problem of gender disproportionality continues to exist, it is necessary to engage in self-assessment and to provide opportunities for the growth of all individuals and school board trustees to more fully realize the goal of achieving gender proportion in K-12 superintendencies. The information learned from this study may pave the way to creating parity and a gender balance. Until such time however, and until the number of superintendents reaches a level on par with the teaching force, disproportionality will continue (Robinson, 2016). In conclusion, as Nanton (2015) suggested, the issue needs to be addressed on all fronts, to move beyond the rhetoric, and finally, for proportionality to become a reality, equal access for all individuals, is necessary.

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APPENDIX A

CityU Research Letter to Professional Organizations

[Date]

Dear [Insert Name of Executive Director],

My name is Heather Henderson and I am a doctoral candidate with City University of Seattle. I am writing to request your support in contacting the female superintendents in the province of [Name of Province]. As we discussed on the telephone, I am conducting a study on the disproportionality of women superintendents in Canadian school districts. It is important to understand the barriers women face when ascending to these top leadership positions and to find ways to support them in their career aspirations.

All female superintendents in [Name of Province] are invited to participate in this research study. Participation required those who choose to become part of this study, to engage in an interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. With the permission of each individual, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The intention of this transcribed record was to maintain an accurate account of the discussion. Confidentiality will be maintained; the participant's name will never be used, rather each will be referred to under a pseudonym.

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or over Skype. The interviews will be mutually agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. If there are any documents that provide value to the study, the researcher also requests permission to review these artifacts.

Thank you for the time you take to review this request. I appreciate your interest in furthering this important topic and look forward to conversations with each of the female superintendents within [Name of Professional Organization]. If they are willing participants, I would appreciate their contact information so that I may contact them directly.

While I will make the results of my findings available to you and to the participants, I would like to again assure you that results will be kept confidential.

Thank you again for your support.

Sincerely,

Heather Henderson

Doctoral Candidate, City University of Seattle

APPENDIX B

CityU Research Letter to Participants

[Date]

Dear [Insert Name of Participant],

My name is Heather Henderson and I am a doctoral candidate with City University of Seattle. I am conducting a study on the disproportionality of women serving as superintendents in Alberta and Saskatchewan school districts. It is important to understand the barriers women face when ascending to these top leadership positions and to find ways to support them in their career aspirations.

I am writing to request your participation in this research study. Participation will require engagement in an interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed. The intention of this transcribed record is to maintain an accurate account of the discussion. Please be assured that confidentiality will be maintained; your name will never be used, rather you will be referred to under a pseudonym.

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or over Skype. We will schedule the interviews at a mutually agreed upon time, method, and location. The intended timeline is for completion of this study is Spring 2017. Additionally, I would ask that if there are any documents that would provide value to the study, I may request permission to review these artifacts.

Please find the informed consent release form attached to this letter. If everything appears to be acceptable, I would ask that you sign the form and return it to me. If you have questions, please let me know and we can arrange a time to talk via phone, skype, or

in person.

Thank you again for your support. I look forward to furthering this discussion and engaging in a great conversation.

Sincerely,

Heather Henderson

Doctoral Candidate, City University of Seattle

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

**CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT**

I, _____, agree to participate in the following research project to be conducted by _____, faculty member or student, in the _____ Program. I understand this research study has been approved by the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form, signed by all persons involved. I further acknowledge that I have been provided an overview of the research protocol and a detailed explanation of the informed consent process.

Title of Project:

Gender Disproportionality in K-12 Superintendencies

Name and Title of Researcher(s):

Heather Henderson, Doctoral Candidate

For Faculty Researcher(s):

Department: _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Immediate Supervisor: _____

For Student Researcher(s):

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Pressley Rankin

Department: _____

Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

Program Coordinator (or Program Director):

Sponsor, if any:

Purpose of Study:

To study gender disproportionality in Canadian K-12 school superintendencies

Research Participation:

I understand I am being asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (the checked options below apply):

- Respond to in-person and/or telephone Interview questions;
- Answer written questionnaire(s);
- Participate in other data gathering activities, specifically, _____;
- Other, specifically, _____.

I further understand that my involvement is voluntary and I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation at any time without negative consequences. I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

Confidentiality

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for _____ years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Signatures

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this

research project at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

Participant's Name: _____

Please Print

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: Heather Henderson

Please Print

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or their supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated as a research participant, I may contact the following individual(s):

_____, Program Coordinator (and/or Program Director), City University of Seattle, at _____ (address, direct phone line and CityU email address).

APPENDIX D

CityU Participant Semi-Structured Interview Guide

In an effort to get to know a little about you, please tell me about your current position and the location of your work assignment.

How long have you been in this position?

What similar positions have you held?

What do you like most about your current job?

What have been your biggest successes?

What do you see as the biggest challenges you face as a superintendent?

What are the biggest challenges you face as a female in this role?

What other challenges do you face as a woman in this role?

What challenges have you noticed that other women face?

Can you speculate as to why these difficulties exist?

Do you have any evidence or can you share your experiences?

Who has been most supportive for you in your current job?

What resources have been most helpful?

Can you suggest what you might need, or others might need, to bring about more success for female superintendents?

APPENDIX E

Themes, Conceptual Categories, and Focused Codes

Themes	Conceptual Categories	Focused Codes
Emotional barriers	Fear	Fear of the unknown Fear of rejection
	Lack of self-confidence	Low self-esteem Cannot do the work
Lifecycle barriers	Support of family	Spouse and children Childcare Family/work balance Length of career journey
	Advanced degree	Time commitment Location of program Educational technology
	Life choices	Balance Age and timing
Administrative barriers	Gender makeup	Male/female balance Changing membership every four years Elections Unaware of own biases Male preference for leadership Social norms
	Policies and procedures	Lack of documentation Lack of gender differences in training
	Elected officials	Lack of training Lack of experience Superintendent is only employee Compensation differences
Gender norms	Misjudged and misunderstood	Not listening Not paying attention Intimidation
	Exclusionary behavior	Not included in all conversations Not included in golf and hockey games – sport activities Feelings of insignificance
	Exclusionary/Demeaning Language	Demeaning words and actions
	Too emotional	Need to “check emotions” Need to take on a different persona

Gender differences	Male leadership	Competitive Aggressive
	Female leadership	Collaborative Build relationships
	Stereotypes	Gender-specific Implications for leaders
Gender-specific mentorship, networking, and coaching	Value in mentorship	Opportunity Strength in relationships Ample time Appropriate pairings Guidance
	Gender-specific mentorship	Valuable when gender-specific relationships built Value to multiple-mentors and both genders Fewer women in leadership so fewer available female mentors Ability to ask for a better pairing How each gender thinks and leads influences mentor/mentee relationship
	Coaching	Slight differences from mentoring and value from coaching
	Networking	Importance of building networks