



European Journal of Educational Management


Volume 8, Issue 2, 117 - 128.

ISSN: 2642-2344

<https://www.eujem.com/>

Navigating the Labyrinth: The Impact of Women's Experiences on Achieving the Superintendency

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Received: November 22, 2024 • Revised: May 26, 2025 • Accepted: June 13, 2025

Abstract: The pathway for women to reach the superintendency in the United States is shaped by entrenched systems that resist progress. Women are often unfairly blamed for their lack of representation, which then perpetuates the notion that they are less suited for leadership. However, women are proving their capabilities by dismantling societal barriers, drawing on, and sharing their lived experiences, and transforming perceptions of female leadership. This study investigated the lived experiences of five female superintendents to reveal the specific actions and strategies that empowered them to achieve the superintendency. Utilizing Seidman's three-interview approach, data were gathered through individual interviews, which were then analyzed thematically. The participants successfully navigated societal challenges by harnessing their unique strengths to influence, mobilize, and build strategic alliances. They seized key opportunities in their journeys and cultivated their skills, talents, and potential. The women did not merely adapt to existing structures; they actively created new opportunities for themselves, their communities, and future generations.

Keywords: *Female superintendents, labyrinth, underrepresentation of women in the superintendency, women's lived experiences and the superintendency.*

To cite this article: Graham, M., & Wasonga, T. A. (2025). Navigating the labyrinth: The impact of women's experiences on achieving the superintendency. *European Journal of Educational Management*, 8(2), 117-128. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eujem.8.2.117>


Introduction

In the United States, public schools are organized in school districts that are overseen by a superintendent. The job of a school superintendent is considered one of the most challenging leadership positions. In the US, research shows that women constitute 76% of K-12 teachers and 57% of elementary principals, yet they occupy a mere 36% of high school principal positions, and 27% of superintendent positions nationwide (Tienken, 2021; Weiner, 2023). The lack of equal representation is not just about numbers; it is also about the absence of recognition, lack of acknowledgment of women's wisdom, skills, experiences, and perspectives in educational leadership roles, and a network of structural and cultural forces perpetuating disparities. For example, studies show that, unlike men, women leaders are more collaborative and inclusive in their approach to leadership, an approach that aligns with current leadership demands but is diminished (Glass & Björk, 2003; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). At the current rate, the Center for American Progress (Warner & Corley, 2017) predicts that women will not achieve parity with men in important leadership positions until 2085.

While some studies demonstrate progress for women in attaining leadership roles (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2008; Weiner, 2023), a larger body of research consistently highlights the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. In these studies, the underrepresentation is attributed to either the shortcomings of women or the presence of deep-rooted biases, discrimination, and institutional barriers (Bonawitz & Nicole, 2009; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2008; Grogan, 2000) or a combination of both. It can be argued that the overabundance of studies focusing on barriers to women's leadership positions also contributes to apathy among women aspiring to executive positions (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). This situation highlights the urgent need to consider the insights and experiences of women as they advance to the superintendency. Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of practicing women superintendents about their paths to the superintendency. The research question that guided the study was:

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What factors do female superintendents perceive as critical to their professional advancement to the superintendency? The objective of the study was to gather insights from practicing female superintendents that tell how their behaviors, actions, and motivations influenced success and advancement to the top position in educational management.

Literature Review

This literature examines the landscape of superintendency in the USA, providing a framework that highlights the considerable progress women have made in attaining leadership positions. It emphasizes the professional advancement opportunities available to them, demonstrating the potential for a more inclusive leadership dynamic.

The Context of the Superintendency in the USA

In the United States, the term "superintendency" generally refers to the role and responsibilities of leaders within a school district. The superintendent is the chief executive officer of a school district - overseeing the administration of the district's schools, implementing policies set by the school board, and ensuring compliance with legislation and educational standards. This position is highly influential and visible in communities with K-12 education systems. School boards typically hire superintendents through a selection process that involves multiple stakeholders, interviews, background checks, and evaluations of their educational philosophy and leadership experience. The length of time that superintendents serve varies widely depending on the size of the school district, their relationship with the school board, community expectations, and personal specific challenges they face, among other factors. On average, superintendents in the U.S. tenure is 3 to 5 years. The relatively short tenure reflects the uncertainties, demands, and pressures of the role. For example, superintendents in larger, urban districts often have shorter tenures, likely due to the complexities and challenges of managing large districts. Relatively, women (67%) have shorter tenures than men (61%). According to Glass (2010), shorter tenures and low representation of women have prompted a significant focus on the experiences and roles of women in the superintendency. Although search firms are making efforts to identify women candidates, women are discouraged from preparing for the superintendency, and school boards are hesitant to hire them (ibid). The recent study by Thomas et al. (2024) highlights the unequal representation of males in superintendency roles, with men occupying 73% compared to 27% for women. Despite this imbalance, the median salary of female superintendents surpasses that of their male counterparts. The study indicates that time constraints and the significant pressures associated with the role of superintendent likely discourage many qualified women from seeking this influential position. This trend may lead many school boards to hesitate in hiring women, which can be explained partly by the metaphors discussed below.

The Metaphors

In their research, Eagly and Carli (2007) employed three metaphors to describe the barriers, opportunities, and circumstances that women encounter as they ascend to top leadership positions. The metaphors are (1) the concrete wall, (2) the glass ceiling, and (3) the labyrinth. Each metaphor offers unique perspectives for identifying and addressing the visible and invisible challenges, circumstances, and opportunities that women aspiring to top positions face (Palmer, 1998, p. 26). The metaphor of "concrete wall" effectively depicts the immense challenges that women often encounter when striving for leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Imadoğlu et al., 2020). These obstacles include but are not limited to systemic discrimination, gender biases, cultural norms, and unequal access to opportunities (Blount, 1998; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). In environments where such barriers are pervasive, women are rarely able to attain positions of power, particularly in fields where "the institutional hierarchy... sets the conditions under which they work" (Bonawitz & Nicole, 2009) such as the superintendency. For instance, societal constructs like the breadwinner (men) and homemaker (women) roles place men in positions of power and women in positions of subservience, at home, at work, and in society (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Division of labor is ingrained in cultural norms and has been stereotyped to favor masculinity as the ideal model for leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Gender stereotypes undermine women's progress toward top leadership positions (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). In America, it was not until the suffrage movement that women's groups and activists began pushing for female superintendent candidates through elected positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). The number of female superintendents rose from 6.26% to 10.9% between 1910 and 1930 (Polka et al., 2008). However, the number of female superintendents declined steadily after 1930, as many suffrage groups disbanded or shifted their focus (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Elsewhere, women lost positions of leadership as states implemented special requirements and/or required formal training for school administrators, and small rural districts were lost to larger districts. Gender discrimination and stereotyping became more prevalent. These barriers, in tandem, and over time hindered women's access to top leadership roles (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

As women pursued top leadership positions, the term "glass ceiling" emerged. It describes the intangible obstacles that many women encounter as they advance in their chosen careers. They progress to a certain point, but then find themselves unable to reach the upper levels of their profession (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017, p. 312). Bonavitz and Nicole (2009) liken this phenomenon to someone hitting the glass ceiling, but "could be dismayed because they did not see it coming in their ascension of the career ladder" (p. 6). This blind spot continued until the 1960's second wave of

women's suffrage that drew attention to the lack of women in leadership roles (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). This attention refocused efforts on the status of women, ultimately leading to greater representation of women in school administration positions (Ibid). Additionally, Title IX of the 1972 Education Act mandated that federally funded institutions could no longer engage in practices that favored one gender over the other (Ware, 2014). Consequently, educational institutions that received federal funding were required to eliminate their low quotas for female enrollment and increase the number of women receiving administrative credentials (Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Ware, 2014). Thus, barriers to leadership shifted from total exclusion for women in all leadership positions to exclusions at the higher executive levels (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In 1986, Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt, journalists for the *Wall Street Journal*, observed that women were approaching executive positions but falling short (Eagly & Carli, 2007). They coined the metaphor "glass ceiling", which depicted another absolute barrier to top leadership roles, blocked by an invisible force (Eagly & Carli, 2007, 2008). Women could see leadership positions from afar, but could not break the barrier to top executive roles (Weyer, 2007).

In response to the discrimination faced by women in obtaining high-level positions, Congress (as cited in Eagly & Carli, 2007) established the Glass Ceiling Commission. According to the Commission's 1995 report, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) held beliefs that created barriers for women aspiring to top leadership roles. Many CEOs were hesitant to hire women for executive positions due to the women's family obligations. Moreover, CEOs believed that clients preferred to work with men in top leadership positions. Thus, despite advancements in middle management, these beliefs obstructed women's access to executive roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In the education sector, women outnumber men by four to one but are underrepresented in top executive positions (Finnan & McCord, 2017). Disparities between male and female hiring rates for school district superintendents persist with women grossly underrepresented in the hiring of superintendents (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Weiner, 2023). The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions reinforces stereotypes and limits access to essential opportunities for demonstrating leadership abilities. According to a study by Munoz et al. (2014), women occupied only 30% of superintendency positions. Men applied for these roles at a significantly higher rate (82%) and had a higher interview rate (74.4%) compared to women, who applied at a rate of 52% and had an interview rate of only 34.5%. These statistics highlight the slow progress in increasing women's representation in superintendency roles, which currently stands at just 27.5% (Glass, 2010; Weiner, 2023). They also underscore the barriers that women face and support the use of the "concrete wall" and "glass ceiling" metaphors as frameworks for understanding these challenges. However, the concrete wall and glass ceiling metaphors have weaknesses in explaining the totality of women's experiences on the journey to top leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2008). There is evidence that more women are advancing even faster to top management (Simpson & Altman, 2000), a finding that indicates inadequacies of the concrete wall and glass ceiling metaphors (Eagly & Carli, 2008). Specifically, Eagly and Carli question assumptions relating to the absolute nature of the barriers. Their later research and those of Simpson and Altman (2000) indicate that men and women access middle-level leadership at similar rates. They argue that these metaphors have not only overlooked the complexities of women's journeys to leadership positions but also failed to recognize the diversity among women - some reaching top leadership roles, others failing, and others facing a variety of obstacles at different stages before reaching those positions. As a result, Eagly and Carli proposed another metaphor, the labyrinth, a metaphor that represents the "complex journey toward a goal worth striving for" (Eagly & Carli, 2008, p. 2). The passage through the labyrinth "is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead" (Ibid, p. 2).

In the labyrinth, routes exist for women who aspire to reach the top despite twists and turns, both expected and unexpected (Eagly & Carli, 2008). Eagly and Carli (2007) explain,

With continuing change, the obstacles that women face have become more surmountable, at least by some women some of the time. Paths to the top do exist, and some women find them. The successful routes can be difficult to discover, however, and therefore we label these circuitous paths a "labyrinth". If women are aware of the barriers to executive positions, they can negotiate their way through the "labyrinth," but finding their pathway demands considerable skill and luck (pp. 6-7).

Although the labyrinth metaphor explains and acknowledges progress in the last three decades, the concrete wall and the glass ceiling metaphors are often used because much of the literature on women's leadership has focused on barriers women contend with. In summary, the concrete wall explains the barriers that directly impose tangible restrictions, resulting in limited representation of women in leadership roles while perpetuating gender disparities in decision-making processes. The glass ceiling explicates the undermining of women's confidence, opportunities, and advancement prospects, creating a perception of a fixed limit on women's career progression, leading to stagnation and frustration even among talented individuals. The labyrinth presents new opportunities for women that require significant effort and resources to overcome obstacles on the path to and in leadership positions.

Despite their significance, these metaphors are not without criticism. They fail to capture fully the complexities of gender inequality and the intersectional ties of gender with other factors such as ethnicity. Criticisms include the oversimplification and static nature of the concrete wall, the imprecision and focus solely on top leadership while ignoring middle-level positions of the glass ceiling, and the overwhelming complexity, intricacies, and individuality of the labyrinth (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Simpson & Altman, 2000). In 2000, Simpson and Altman argued that the glass

ceiling has changed, with young women taking advantage of opportunity initiatives and advancing to leadership positions. They also noted that some women have overcome challenges and progressed to top leadership roles, while others have advanced more quickly in lower-ranking management positions. However, Broadbridge and Simpson (2011) argued that opportunity initiatives have neither reduced male dominance in top leadership positions nor gender parity. The persistence in under-representation of women in leadership roles confirms existence of both the concrete wall and glass ceiling. These metaphors continue to be relevant in understanding women's career development in the superintendency (Eagly & Carli, 2007), particularly the labyrinth, which illustrates how women navigate complex contexts in the education sector to become superintendents.

Methodology

This was a qualitative case study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) where the researchers were the key data-collecting instrument (Creswell, 2007). Five participants who fit the parameters of the case were selected using criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) - (1) female, (2) serving as a superintendent of a public school district in Illinois within the last five years, and (3) willing to discuss their life history, personal experiences becoming a superintendent, and significant factors influencing their trajectory. Female superintendents were first identified through the Illinois State Board of Education website. Those who had served for a minimum of five years were selected for further review. The five-year mark was used as an indicator of success considering that the average tenure of superintendents is three to four years with 50% leaving in the first five years (McCord & Finnan, 2019). Female superintendents who had served for five years and above were invited by email to participate in the study. The recruitment letter stated the purpose of the study, the time commitments, as well as the researcher's contact information. Fifteen superintendents responded. Seven were available, and five participated in the three interviews.

Data were collected using Seidman's (2006) three-part in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured, ninety-minute interviews. Seidman's method of three in-depth interviews helped research participants reconstruct their experiences related to the topic of study. The first interview focused on their life histories, including experiences within their family, school, friends, and work that led them to leadership roles. The second interview focused on concrete details of their present experiences within the superintendency. In the third interview, participants reflected on the meanings of their experiences, including significant factors that led them to the superintendency. After each interview session, the recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo transcription software.

The researchers generated interview questions. Each of the three interview discussions followed Krueger and Casey's (2015) protocol for qualitative study interviews. For example, each interview session began with an opening question to help participants get comfortable. The opening questions were simple and factual (Please state your name and the number of years you have been in education). Following was an introductory question that helped participants focus on the topic of the interview (Please talk about your work history and leadership positions you have held before your current superintendency). Then, a transition question that linked to key questions (Please describe the moment you realized you wanted to pursue the superintendency). Key questions were the focus of the study and took up 70% of the interview time (Please share your significant experiences along the way to and in the superintendency). Each session ended with three final questions focusing on a summary of the major topics covered, and their opinion on how well the summary captured what was said during the interview; the "all things considered" question (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 2); and pinpointing the most important issue discussed during the interview. The final ending question asked participants if there was anything that should have been discussed during the interview but was not.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) assessed the study for any potential risks or harm to the participants (Creswell, 2007). Consent letters were obtained from the participants to allow for the recording of the interviews. The participants were provided with the topics and questions before the interviews, with the understanding that the interviewer may change the wording and order of the questions, depending on the flow and dialogue of the interview (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the interview questions, pilot interviews were conducted with two non-participating superintendents who met the selection criteria. This process helped in refining the interview questions, as well as enabling the researchers to practice interviewing, note-taking, and reflection. It also helped in gauging the timing and pacing of each interview. The validity of the data was established using Seidman's (2006) three-part structure, which allows participants to reflect on their responses, and Krueger and Casey's (2015) protocol, which allows participants to be themselves. Seidman (2006, p. 24) believes that his three-part structure helps in achieving authenticity. To enhance the validity of the data, member checks of the recordings were conducted to ensure that the experiences of the participants and their intentions were accurately represented (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Feedback from the members guided the additions, deletions, or corrections made to the transcripts (Moustakas, 1994).

Analyzing Data

The data were analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) method, which involved three steps: horizontalization, reduction and elimination, and clustering into themes. During horizontalization, the transcripts were read and every statement or

phrase that was relevant to the research question was listed, known as invariant constituents. The invariant constituents were then refined through reduction and elimination, which involved omitting overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions. Two questions guided this process: (1) did the statement contain a moment that was sufficient and necessary for understanding the factors critical in their career trajectory and career as superintendent; and (2) was it possible to abstract and label the statement? If the answer to both questions was yes, the statement was deemed relevant to the research questions. The invariant constituents were then clustered to create core themes. With the core themes determined, textual and structural descriptions were constructed for each study participant, providing details of "what" and "how" participants defined their experiences. These descriptions were combined into textural-structural descriptions for each research participant, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes, thus creating meanings and essences of their experiences. Together, these themes produced a composite description of the meanings and essences for the whole group (Moustakas, 1994). Below is a map and codes used to help develop the themes.

Theme 1: Exercising Unique Abilities to Align, Influence, Mobilize, and Form Alliances				
Networking	Recognizing Barriers	Collaborative Leader	Community Support	Relationship Building
Theme 2: Challenging Dominant Narratives by Seizing Opportunities and Circumstances as They Arise				
Gender Bias	Shaping of Consciousness	Proving Women Can Lead	Having to do More	
Theme 3: Skills, Talent, and Sacrifice				
Resiliency	Family Responsibilities	Life Balance		

Findings

The findings presented in this article are part of a larger study. In this study, five female superintendents from school districts in Northern Illinois shared their perspectives on women's experiences and agency in leadership roles. Each of these women had held the superintendent position for over five years, and four had previously occupied leadership roles in other school systems. At the time of the study, they all had school-aged children living at home. Four were married and all but one held a doctoral degree. Three of the superintendents were hired from within their current employing district, while one was hired from a previous district. Three worked in small school districts with less than 3,000 students. While their experiences align with previous research findings, their stories provide valuable insights into navigating complex political systems, leadership roles, and barriers, as illustrated by the metaphors - the concrete wall, glass ceiling, and labyrinth. The women demonstrated exceptional abilities in learning, aligning their aspirations with community expectations, and reflecting on their lived experiences for leadership. They exceeded longevity expectations in the superintendency due to their commitment, selflessness, loyalty, and strong values.

Three themes highlight the women's unique actions, interventions, and reflections, showcasing their stories as a gateway to leadership through their experiences - what women excel at. The strengths and strategies emerging from this study reflect a labyrinth, serving as a roadmap for other women pursuing leadership positions and helping to break through the glass ceiling. The participants' pseudonyms are - Gail, Alice, Ruth, Maya, and Sonia.

Exercising Unique Abilities to Align, Influence, Mobilize, and Form Alliances

Unlike their male counterparts, who often employ a transactional style and maintain power over others, women embrace a transformational approach, leveraging power collaboratively with their subordinates (Brunner, 1994; Rosener, 2011). This distinction not only empowers but also fosters an inclusive leadership model. According to Derrington and Sharratt (2009), women have reckoned with the need to exercise power variably to access and survive top leadership. In this study, Gail recognized that she could use collective power to mobilize constituents; "it is about collaboration, building relationships, working with the community, and sharing ideas." She developed a great rapport with her staff and aligned her interests with community interest, "I knew the leadership team. I knew the staff. I had a good relationship with the unions...I was within the district, so I knew the needs really well and felt comfortable working with them". When the board announced they would wait a year to renew Gail's contract, the collective power of relationships and alliances she had cultivated over time became evident, helping her remain in the superintendency.

I've never seen such overwhelming positive support. That was not anticipated. But I had been there a long time and I had credibility with staff and the community...all of our board meetings had to be moved to auditoriums...And just, I would say like 99.99 % positive.

Sonia took advantage of hometown familiarity to mobilize support for her access to superintendency:

I made it to the final cut and there was another gentleman that made it to the final cut. We got interviewed in public in a school gymnasium...It was the middle school gym where I went to middle school, too. I could remember learning how to square dance in that gym. However, I got to be honest, I used that to my advantage,

because I was able to draw on some of those relations, things...it made people just feel a little like, OK, she's one of us.

Alice was an experienced interim superintendent when she was approached about a position as a permanent superintendent. Despite having demonstrated her capabilities, questions remained about her readiness for the role. Being self-aware, Alice responded confidently, showing that she had no room for self-doubt. This not only set her on the path to claiming her rightful position but also subtly challenged the existing power dynamics. She explained,

So, when the board president came to me, which is something I can't believe I did, he said, "What do you think? Do you think you're ready?" I said to him, "Well, if you don't think I'm ready, then I guess you have your answer." I got the job.

Women in this study employed self-awareness and cultivated relationships that enabled them to use power differently, creatively, and successfully to access the superintendency. They formed new alliances and power dynamics that made them desirable and indispensable. In the labyrinth metaphor, women "who attain positions of power are most successful when they adopt female approaches to power which stress collaboration, inclusion, and consensus-building-models based on the belief that one person is not more powerful than another" (Brunner, 1995, p.24).

Challenging Dominant Narratives by Seizing Opportunities and Circumstances as They Arise

Women face more challenges when aiming for leadership roles. Derrington and Sharratt (2009, p. 10) argued, "Women often have to fight harder, wait longer, and endure more scrutiny to become superintendents," as explained in the glass ceiling metaphor. They often delay pursuing leadership positions until they feel confident and prepared (McGee, 2010). Alice, Maya, Gail, and Sonia were aware that leadership opportunities were not readily availed to women. Instead of waiting, they sought and seized every opportunity presented or present. Maya, in particular, worked beyond expectations, not only to feel prepared for the job but also to challenge the norm. She said, "I've had all this training. I've talked to people, I've gone through bachelor's, master's, doctorate, and I am like, I am ready". However, having it all is difficult, as Derrington and Sharratt (2009, p. 11) note, "some sacrifice might be necessary to 'have it all'" and it may not equate to success. Doing it all was Gail's experience. She grabbed every available opportunity in leadership roles that were in addition to her formal job.

So, there was a time when we didn't have a H.R. director, so, I filled in there. There was a time when we didn't have a business official and I filled in on that, when they needed an associate superintendent, I filled in for that too. And I think, as that role expanded, that's when I kind of started building confidence and thinking, OK, I can do this.

Gail's lived experiences highlight the sacrifices women often make to feel and be perceived as ready for leadership roles. Despite holding multiple district-level positions, including associate superintendency, Gail had to compete with less experienced men for the superintendent position. She was not selected, illustrating the concept of the glass ceiling. She confessed, "I was under immense pressure, quite overwhelmed, felt unprepared, and I made a critical error, jeopardizing a high-level position which nearly cost me the job." Nonetheless, she remained additive, taking responsibility for her missteps, displaying courage, and transforming this setback into a valuable lesson. The current superintendent acknowledged the outstanding accomplishments that had made her indispensable; "Listen, even if you don't, we think you're the right person. We don't want to go back out again. Please consider taking it. If you don't want it after the first year, we'll let you have your old job back."

While Gail and Alice did everything to be prepared for the superintendency, Sonia challenged the notion of women trying to be 100% prepared, "You don't have to know everything, but you should take every opportunity to learn. I believe you don't need to have all the knowledge before you begin; you'll learn as you go along." Sonia further stated, "Any person who takes on a superintendency, whether it's in a small town or big town, needs to feel OK with having not known everything. There is no way you can go to school and learn everything that you have to learn." She continued, "I think women sometimes think we have to learn everything before we do something, and we don't. Just jump up in and you'll have a lot of people to help you along the way." She was successful in getting to the superintendency without being "super-prepared" (McGee, 2010, p. 12). Sonia explained that she understands that she is a woman superintendent, and that, "...it is different to be a female leader than it is to be a male leader...you have to be a little bit more careful as a female." She takes extra steps as a female superintendent, to avoid, "gossip."

I have a list of guys that I don't have lunch alone with... It's just constantly talking about your husband, and you constantly talk about your family and just make sure you're putting that out there. But you kind of feel like you have to be a little bit careful, even in this world today.

She added,

I had some Facebook posts not too long ago from a guy who disagreed with everything I did. But his second quote was, "but she's so darn good looking." ...I thought that was weird. You wouldn't ever say that about a man, you

know? And I don't think a woman would post that about a male supervisor. Those are the kind of things that we (women) do have to deal with, and we do have to think about ourselves.

Female superintendents in this study considered challenges of the labyrinth to be conquered. Sonia challenged the norm, and openly discussed her family to protect herself, Maya returned to the position of building principal to feel fully qualified for the superintendent role, and Gail endured hardship in her school district to become the first female superintendent.

Skills, Talents, and Sacrifice

Research indicates that the role of a superintendent requires specific skills and entails significant personal sacrifices, including time and family commitments (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Melito-Conners, 2019). Successfully balancing professional and personal responsibilities highlights the exceptional skills required for women to succeed in this position (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). In her preparation for the superintendency, Alice dedicated over 200 hours to meetings with students, parents, staff, and community members, to build relationships. Despite the demands of these interactions, she also managed to fulfill her other responsibilities, including paperwork, state reports, emails, phone calls, and personal matters.

Nurturing skills and talents to balance work and personal needs takes time, practice, and learning from mistakes. Ruth, Gail, and Alice learned the importance of checking their emails at the start of each day. According to Gail, this practice prepared her for the rest of the day, "I think I'm probably like most superintendents, and that when I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is check my e-mail, to know what is coming." They (participants) get to work before students and staff and/or stay in the office past dismissal time. As Ruth put it, "...I get there about 6:00 am which gives me a good hour before other people start showing up. It is my time, which is nice". Planning their time included time for "building relationships" including "weekends, which offer extra time to do superintendent-orientated tasks." Alice agreed, "...it makes sense. Some of it is just getting caught up or making you feel like you can have a little bit more breathing room during the week to do some other check-ins or site visits to the schools." Maya got, "...maybe about a half day," to herself on the weekends to do things unrelated to work. Alice preferred,

...to make one weekend day and non-workdays...to breeze through my email or texts. I usually try to have it happen on Saturday, but then usually the other weekend day, I'll spend, unfortunately, anywhere from two to four hours, depending on what I need to do.

Participants noted that improving their skills helped them achieve a better balance between work and personal life. For instance, in her previous district, Gail estimated that she spent about 80% of her weekends working and only 20% on personal activities. In contrast, in her current district, that balance has shifted to approximately 40% work and 60% personal time, or even as much as 30% work and 70% personal time during more favorable weekends. Ruth shared that she spends about 70% of her weekends on work-related tasks. However, she emphasized that this is largely her choice, as she prefers to work during times when she doesn't feel rushed or emotional. This approach allows her to think clearly and craft thoughtful responses. Explaining a typical day, Sonia narrated,

On a typical day, I generally have at least one or more contacts with community outreach, whether it be a United Way meeting or a chamber board meeting or a small group that has bridged off of that...and I'm on the YMCA board too, so each of those have breakout groups...For instance, today, I was e-mailing back and forth with our, it's called the [name of town] Growth Alliance, which is like our economic development council. And I see a lot of my effort over the next two years going into that work with them...And I really think that kind of thinking ahead and making those community connections are a big part of my day.

Sacrifice and success are rooted in resilience. Resilience includes the positive characteristics that enable individuals to overcome life's obstacles (Howard & Irving, 2014). According to Baldwin et al. (2004), resilience is defined as "the capacity to advance after adversity" (p. 3). Christman and McClellan (2008), in their study of women administrators, described resilience as "an adaptive and coping trait that develops and enhances positive character skills, such as patience, tolerance, responsibility, compassion, determination, and risk-taking" (p. 7), as well as spirituality (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Each of the study participants exhibited a unique combination of characteristics that likely aided them in pursuing the role of superintendent. Alice, for example, demonstrated resilience by unexpectedly taking back control when confronted about her gender roles. She recounted an experience where a superintendent told her, "You know, you can't have it all. You're working on your doctorate, starting your family, and taking on these significant responsibilities." He expressed doubt about her ability to handle it all, stating, "I'm just ready to see you break. You're not going to be able to manage all of this." In response, Alice confidently replied, "OK, watch me."

In contrast to McGee's (2010) and Sharp et al. (2004) studies, every superintendent in this study had school-age children. They carefully considered how their roles as superintendents would affect their family lives. Except for Gail, the other superintendents engaged in discussions with their families and reached mutual agreements that their lives would change significantly, requiring support from each other. Although these conversations were challenging, they resulted in changes

in family situations. For instance, Alice's husband took on the role of a stay-at-home dad, and Ruth and her husband moved to ensure that both had an equitable commute to work.

Furthermore, the superintendents discussed spirituality as a grounding force in their lives. Women often see a connection between spirituality, success, and their ability to persevere during conflicts and challenging situations (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). According to a study of superintendents, women's sense of hope helped them build resilience and informed their approach to uncertainties (Simmons & Johnson, 2008). Maya tapped into her inner strength and voice, viewing barriers as challenges to overcome, much like navigating the labyrinth.

I do make sure that on Sundays I get that spiritual nourishment. That is something that's key for me, and that is what gives me hope, because in the superintendency you're providing hope to people, right? You're saying you can do it. Yes, you can. We believe in you. You can, even if you don't know how we're going to do it.

Reed (2018) conducted a study on leaders in turbulent situations and discovered that women are significantly more resilient than men. In a three-year study involving 3,876 men and 4,779 women, Zenger and Folkman (2019) found that the lack of confidence women often experience early in their careers motivates them to take more initiative, be receptive to feedback, develop resilience, and ultimately become better leaders.

Discussion

Data indicates the women in this study are products of their life experiences. Amplifying their voices enhances representation. Their experiences enabled them to overcome the limitations of their gender and navigate the structural and cultural forces perpetuating disparities. The stories of women in this study, along with the metaphor of a labyrinth, demonstrate how they tapped into their potential by mobilizing resources, challenging societal norms, and building alliances. As these women paved their way to the superintendency, they faced challenges, some related to the "responses they are capable of evoking" in their communities due to their lower social status (Dahl, 1957, p. 206). As Miller (2018) and Houston and Eadie (2002) suggest, the superintendency requires political savviness, or as Myers suggests, a variety of skills and attributes to not only navigate multiple competing roles and challenges (Myers, 2011) but also to align with and influence the complex interpersonal and organizational dynamics within the workplace and broader political environment (Miller, 2018). Politically, power holds great significance and influences individual behavior, "from who talks to whom to who decides an issue" (Devadoss & Muth, 1984, p. 379). According to Muth (1984), individuals with power can influence the behaviors of others. This definition highlights influence, relationships, and potential within individuals (Devadoss & Muth, 1984) that are inherent in everyone. The crucial question is how that power is utilized. According to Brunner (1994), women perceive power as the ability to get things done through teamwork and consensus (power to/with). Men exercise power over and above those around them. With this, men have influenced how society works, specifically through reductive decisions on social issues, society functions, and particularly gendered roles that have isolated women from leadership as explained by the concrete wall and the glass ceiling metaphors. However, women's progress is explained by the labyrinth metaphor which shows that while challenges to women's leadership still exist, they are becoming more manageable, with diverse pathways to success emerging. With this progress, Adler (1999, p. 259) noted that even though women are "not viewed as androgynous or indistinguishable from their male counterparts. ... they are seen as women who are leaders", a concept that should be embraced because of their unique abilities.

Distinguishing men from women, research indicates that men apply for positions when they are only 60% qualified, while women apply when they meet 100% of the qualifications (Ramaswamy, 2020). Although the majority of women in this study worked to be perfect first before they were hired, one did not follow that path, she opted to learn as she led. Viewing women's leadership as different from men's is a limiting perspective rooted in deficit thinking. Leadership shaped by women's experiences illuminates and provides valuable insights and inspiration for those who will follow. Research on women's ability to achieve and thrive in leadership roles tends to accentuate barriers that are beyond their control (Blount, 1998; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018; Weiner, 2023) rather than matters within their control. Efforts to address these barriers have not led to equitable gender representation in top leadership positions because they have focused on policy and preparation, instead of structural and cultural forces perpetuating disparities. Policies and preparation have increased the number of female applicants, not actual hires (Ibid), indicating the persistence of the glass ceiling. A study by Glass and Björk (2003) revealed that only 18% of qualified female applicants for superintendent positions were hired. Superville and Baker (2022) noted that only 27% of external hires in 241 districts were women, while 50% of women in leadership roles were promoted from within, often as interim superintendents. This study and its framework demonstrate that despite systemic disparities, women are attaining middle and top leadership positions through proactive leadership initiatives, deliberate skill acquisition, unwavering personal efforts, and serendipity. The women in this study did not just play catch-up; they blazed new trails with determination, persistence, and ingenuity. They focused on taking actionable steps within their control to achieve success, a notion substantiated by research indicating that women are hired based on accomplishments (Superville & Baker, 2022).

Conclusion

The findings in this study underline the need to shift focus from increasing the number of qualified women in the pool to creating opportunities for women to demonstrate, practice, reflect, and excel in leadership roles. It is crucial for women to actively seek leadership opportunities, succeed, and serve as role models and mentors in their communities and to future female leaders. The data shows that participants succeeded by focusing on factors they could control, overcoming local obstacles, embracing feminine leadership styles, challenging norms, and viewing failure as learning opportunities. These findings underscore the importance of women understanding their instrumental strengths and worth, expanding their work beyond the limitations of their identity without losing it, prioritizing self-preservation, and seeking leadership opportunities. Previous research by Derrington and Starratt (2009) supports this argument. The four strategies recommended for women to succeed in leadership focus on what they can control in their professional and personal lives. The first strategy is to clearly define their goals and remain determined to achieve them. The second is to balance professional and personal lives, understanding that their dual roles require sacrifices. The third is to negotiate boundaries or find creative solutions to ensure that the job they are seeking does not negatively affect family life. Finally, prioritizing self-care and conserving energy by not taking on too much work at home or work. In other words, understand the barriers, and navigate the labyrinth skillfully.

Derrington and Starratt (2009) also found that successful women often have strong family support systems, and are unusually resilient and flexible. Women in this study pursued leadership roles knowing the challenges they faced, setting goals, and designing strategies to achieve their goals. They prioritized building relationships, rallying people around common objectives, and seizing available opportunities to demonstrate success. They tapped into their natural abilities/talents and potential, often making personal sacrifices to serve others. In many cases, their performance exceeded the expectations set by men. Their lived experiences indicated that by investing substantial time and resources in meeting the demands of the current job, they not only garnered vital capital from stakeholders but also displayed exceptional leadership qualities that women pursuing the superintendency could mirror, and communities could use as exemplars.

Recommendations

This study has delineated women's experiences that set them on the path to the superintendency. We recommend further research that would determine attributes and leadership opportunities that women aspiring to, and in leadership need to be competitive for top leadership. The authors also recommend similar studies with male superintendents.

Limitations

The experiences shared by superintendents were based entirely on their recollections of events.

Ethics statement

The study was approved through the Institutional Review Board at the Northern Illinois University.

Conflict of interest

This study was conducted anonymously and without any undue influence or compensation that could lead to a conflict of interest.

Generative AI Statement

The author has not used generative AI or AI-supported technologies.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Graham: Conceptualization, design, analysis, writing. Wasonga: Technical and material support, Drafting manuscript, Analysis Editing/reviewing, supervision.

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