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Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and
Transformational Leadership

By

Sara Stone

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Frank C. Worrell, Co-Chair

Professor Özge Hacıfazlıoğlu, Co-Chair

Professor Jabari Mahiri

Spring 2026

Abstract

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By

Sara Stone

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Frank C. Worrell, Co-Chair

Professor Özge Hacifazlıoğlu, Co-Chair

This dissertation investigated how Whiteness, gender, and leadership preparation shape the development of transformational superintendents in PK–12 education. Although most educators in the United States are White women, their representation in the superintendency remains disproportionately low compared to men. White women superintendents occupy a paradoxical position: their racial identity and positional authority confer privilege while their gender requires navigating systemic barriers. Positioned within this duality, they are uniquely situated to either reinforce inequitable structures or advance equity-centered transformation. Guided by applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness, and inclusive leadership theories, this study examined how identity, preparation, and positionality influence the leadership practices of White women superintendents. Using a qualitative life history methodology, the study used interviews with superintendents in California to illuminate how White women leaders experience privilege, navigate marginalization, and construct meaning in their roles. Four central questions guided the research. The research questions were designed to investigate (a) women’s career paths to the superintendency; (b) how White women superintendents experience and navigate race, gender, and White racial privilege in their leadership roles; (c) the challenges and opportunities White women superintendents encounter while leading equity-centered transformation; and (d) the ways White women superintendents recognize and respond to Whiteness in their leadership practices and how this shapes their equity commitments. Findings highlighted how White women superintendents negotiate the intersections of race and gender in leadership. The study offers insight into how preparation, mentorship, and systemic support can empower White women to act with racial consciousness, dismantle inequities, and lead with justice-centered, inclusive practices.

Keywords: White women superintendents; Whiteness; gender and leadership; equity-centered leadership; leadership preparation; PK–12 education

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Chapter 1

Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and Transformational Leadership

Race, gender, and education in the United States are deeply intertwined, shaped by enduring forces of White hegemony and misogyny that have historically structured public schools (Ahmed, 2004b; Mills, 1997). Leadership itself is gendered, with bias shaping how authority and competence are perceived and assigned. Although White women make up 74.3% of teachers, they represent only 27% of superintendents (White, 2023; Zippia, n.d.). This paradox—holding racial privilege yet facing gendered exclusion—sits at the heart of this study. Addressing inequity within education requires more than surface-level reforms; it calls for transformational change. Ladson-Billings (2006) framed this need through the concept of the “education debt” (p. 3), which captures not simply achievement gaps but the cumulative impact of centuries of systemic neglect and oppression disproportionately affecting students of color. Love (2019, 2023) extended this argument, insisting that equity cannot emerge from incremental reforms to fundamentally unjust systems but requires abolitionist leadership and teaching practices rooted in love, justice, and freedom. Fullan (2020) further underscored that meaningful transformation demands coherence across systems, capacity building, and moral purpose. Taken together, these perspectives affirmed that educational transformation must be bold, systemic, and justice-centered. For White women superintendents, this means acknowledging the privileges and barriers inherent in their positionality and committing to leadership practices that disrupt White supremacy culture, repair historical harms, and expand equitable opportunities for all students.

This study explored how White women superintendents, positioned by both racial privilege and gendered barriers, navigate their leadership roles in PK–12 education and pursue transformational change. This chapter introduces the focus of the study, highlights its significance, details the methods used, and considers its potential impact on both practice and scholarship.

1.1. Problem Statement

The demographic mismatch between educators and students underscores a pressing equity challenge. Although most students in U.S. public schools are students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b), most educators are White women, creating a structural imbalance between those who hold authority and those most impacted by systemic inequities. White women dominate the teaching profession numerically, comprising over 74% of teachers and nearly 80% of principals (Taie & Lewis, 2022; Zippia, n.d.), but the systems they work within have historically reproduced White supremacy culture and exclusionary practices that disproportionately harm students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Love, 2019). Despite their dominance in teaching, White women remain underrepresented in executive leadership roles, particularly in the superintendency. Nationally, women account for only 27% of superintendents, and the overwhelming majority of those positions are held by White

men (Superville, 2021; Weiner et al., 2023). This paradox, in which White women are both privileged by race and marginalized by gender, creates a unique tension in how they enact leadership.

In California, this paradox is especially stark. The state educates more than 6 million PK–12 students, over three quarters of whom are students of color, with 19% identified as English learners and more than half qualifying for free or reduced-price meals (California Department of Education [CDE], 2023). Yet nearly 75% of California's superintendents are White, and most are men, even though women make up the vast majority of the teaching force (Torlakson & Darling-Hammond, 2022). These demographic and leadership disparities highlight the urgency of preparing, supporting, and holding superintendents accountable for equity-centered, transformational change. White women need intentional preparation and sustained support to become superintendents who can interrupt entrenched patterns of inequity shaped by both race and gender. Without preparation and ongoing development rooted in racial consciousness, critical self-reflection, and inclusive practices, White women leaders who reach the superintendency risk perpetuating systemic inequities rather than dismantling them.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how White women superintendents navigate the intersections of Whiteness, gender, and leadership in PK–12 systems. It explored their career pathways, their responses to White racial privilege and gendered norms, and the challenges and opportunities they encountered while leading for equity-centered transformation. The study investigated how these leaders' recognition and responses to Whiteness and gender shape their equity commitments. By centering the paradox of racial privilege and gendered exclusion, this study sought to understand how White women superintendents make meaning of their leadership and how they can be intentionally prepared and supported to disrupt systemic inequities rather than reproduce them. Without preparation and ongoing development grounded in racial consciousness, critical self-reflection, and inclusive practices, White women superintendents risk reinforcing the very inequities they are positioned to dismantle.

1.2.1. Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. What are the career paths women take on their journey to the superintendency?
2. How do White women superintendents understand and navigate the intersecting influences of gender and racial privilege as they construct their leadership identities across their careers?
3. What challenges and opportunities do White women superintendents experience as they lead for equity-centered transformation?

4. How do White women superintendents recognize, name, and respond to Whiteness as a systemic force in the districts they lead, and how does this shape their equity leadership practice?

1.2.2. Significance of the Study

Without a direct examination of Whiteness, gender, and equity, leadership preparation and practice remain incomplete. White women superintendents, situated at the intersection of racial privilege and gendered barriers, can either reinforce systemic inequities or leverage their positional authority to lead transformational change. This study is significant because it examined the paradox White women superintendents face. Although White women are the majority in the teaching profession, they are underrepresented in the superintendency, holding racial privilege yet simultaneously navigating gender-based exclusion. Understanding how White women experience and respond to these dynamics is essential for developing leadership preparation and support structures that cultivate racial consciousness, critical self-reflection, and inclusive transformational practices.

By examining the career paths of White women superintendents, how they respond to Whiteness and gender, and how they commit to equity, this study advances scholarship on educational leadership. It provides insights to improve superintendent preparation and professional learning programs. It highlights how White women leaders can move beyond performative allyship toward authentic, justice-centered leadership that interrupts the historical reproduction of inequity in PK–12 schools. Ultimately, the significance of this study rests in its potential to guide districts, leadership preparation programs, and policy leaders in designing systems that prepare, support, and hold White women superintendents accountable for leading transformational change that advances equity for all students, especially those from historically marginalized communities. This research contributes to three key areas of professional knowledge:

- Equity-centered leadership preparation: offering insights into how White women leaders can be prepared to confront Whiteness and lead inclusively.
- Gender and leadership in PK–12 systems: highlighting the unique barriers White women face in attaining and sustaining the superintendency.
- Systemic transformation: illuminating the conditions that support White women in disrupting inequitable practices and fostering just, inclusive school systems.

Findings of this study may inform superintendent preparation programs, leadership pipelines, and professional learning for current and aspiring leaders. More broadly, this work contributes to the urgent conversation about how PK–12 leaders can move beyond maintaining the status quo and instead lead with racial consciousness, inclusivity, and a commitment to systemic transformation.

1.3. Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction provides an overview of the study, including the problem statement, purpose, research questions, and significance. It establishes the research context and outlines its potential contributions to the field of educational leadership.

Chapter 2: Literature Review examines scholarship across three domains: (a) challenges and support structures for leaders on the pathway to the superintendency, (b) the invisibility of Whiteness and the role of White women superintendents, and (c) women as equity-centered transformative leaders. Together, these domains provide the conceptual foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities White women superintendents encounter as they navigate identity, privilege, and equity commitments.

Chapter 3: Methodology outlines the qualitative life history design of the study and explains its use in capturing the personal and professional journeys of White women superintendents. Drawing on phenomenological and ethnographic traditions, the approach situates individual experiences within broader organizational and sociocultural contexts. The chapter also describes the California context, participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and the strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness.

Chapter 4, Case Vignettes and Findings (Finding A: Constructing Leadership Identity: Identity as the Foundation of Leadership), presents the results of the study through 10 bounded case vignettes and a cross-case thematic analysis focused on constructing leadership identity as the foundation of leadership. Drawing on life history interviews with White women superintendents serving racially, linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse districts across California, the chapter centers participants' meaning making as they navigated Whiteness, gender, positional authority, and equity-centered leadership. The findings demonstrate that leadership for equity was not experienced as a technical skill set but as an identity-conscious, relational, and iterative process shaped by nonlinear career pathways, mentorship and sponsorship, internal identity work, purpose making, and trust building. Leadership identity emerged as continually constructed over time through reflection, relationships, inquiry, and encounters with power and legitimacy, establishing identity as the analytic foundation for equity-centered practice.

Chapter 5, Findings (Findings B: Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: The Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency and Finding C: Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, Access, and Risk), extends this analysis by examining how leadership identities were enacted, constrained, and sustained within the emotional, political, and racialized realities of the superintendency. Finding B, Leading Collaboratively in Isolation, illuminates the paradoxical conditions of the role, including emotional labor, loneliness, moral burden, political navigation, and structural constraints, alongside superintendents' efforts to build collective capacity, co-conspiratorship, and relational trust to sustain equity work. Finding C, Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities, examines how gendered expectations, Whiteness, and additional identity dimensions shaped access, legitimacy, risk, and equity practice. Together, these findings demonstrate how White women superintendents navigated a dual positionality marked by racial privilege and gendered constraint, increasingly recognized Whiteness as a

systemic force, and acted with intentionality to disrupt inequitable structures while managing resistance and accountability.

Chapter 6, Discussion and Conclusion, synthesizes the findings of this study to show that equity-centered leadership for White women superintendents is best understood as an iterative process of meaning making shaped by identity, relationships, emotion, and structural context. Drawing across the three major findings, the chapter demonstrates that leadership was not experienced as a technical or linear endeavor, but as a recursive practice in which superintendents continually reflected on identity and positionality, built relational trust and accountability, acted within political and organizational constraints, and recalibrated in response to new challenges. The discussion connects these patterns to applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness theory, and inclusive leadership theory, culminating in an emerging framework of iterative identity-conscious leadership. This chapter concludes that equity-centered superintendent practice is sustained not by individual will alone, but through the interaction of moral purpose, cross-racial trust, structural conditions, layered identities, and the emotional labor required to lead change in systems shaped by Whiteness and patriarchy.

Chapter 7, Implications and Recommendations, brings together the study's findings to show that equity-centered leadership in the superintendency is best understood as an evolving practice shaped through identity-conscious reflection, relational trust, and the structural conditions of district leadership. The implications highlight that leading for equity requires more than individual commitment or technical skill; it depends on how preparation pathways, governance expectations, organizational design, and professional learning environments enable leaders to interpret responsibility, exercise authority, and sustain moral purpose over time. The iterative identity-conscious leadership cycle introduced in this chapter provides a conceptual bridge between the findings and the recommendations, illustrating how reflection, relational engagement, action, and contextual response function as interconnected dimensions of equity leadership. Building on this understanding, the chapter offers recommendations across leadership practice, policy, and governance, superintendent preparation, and future research, emphasizing that transformational change in PK–12 systems requires collective responsibility and intentional institutional design to support belonging, dignity, and justice for students and communities.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

White women have historically held a dominant presence in PK–12 education, playing a central role in shaping systems that perpetuate White supremacy and hegemonic practices, contributing to the inequities present in today's educational landscape. Most teachers are female (74.3%) and White (79.3%; Zippia, n.d.). Mills (1997) would have claimed these statistics as an example of the "racial contract" (p. 3). The racial contract describes how society has used race to stratify and

organize systems, shaping mindsets, policies, laws, and practices (Mills, 1997). Historically, White women have been perpetrators of discriminatory actions that have led to inequity and the dominance of White hegemony in school and social work systems (C. D. McRae, 2018); however, an opportunity exists for White women to repair the harm done within classrooms and in leadership positions across PK–12 systems (Plummer et al., 2021). Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) agreed and examined the role that formal leaders, including White women, play in establishing routines and practices to foster and sustain equity-focused teams of educators. Specific drivers of equitable leadership practice create the conditions for transformation within the system, such as addressing disparities and promoting action through structured professional learning routines, redistributing power by building distributed leadership, and continuously exploring equity-driven improvements (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Leaders who apply these drivers of equitable practice have the potential to break the racial contract (Mills, 1997) in PK–12 systems and move toward liberation and justice.

As a White woman in PK–12 education, I know I am not alone in being an equity-driven, abolitionist educator. However, I also know that as a White woman, I am a part of a group that has benefited from the racial contract (Mills, 1997) and has created and reproduced harm for historically marginalized communities. When viewing PK–12 education systems through the lenses of applied critical leadership and critical Whiteness theory, it is clear that U.S. society is structured by race, which drives racial inequity (Hayes-Greene & Love, 2018; Santamaria, 2021). This system is more than just corrupt; it is a deliberate, large-scale, intentional, and profitable machine designed to harm the education of Black children (Love, 2023). Given that White hegemony has permeated through and has perpetuated inequity in U.S. PK–12 systems, it is essential to determine how leaders can transform these systems. The role of superintendent, the highest formal leadership position in PK–12 education, which holds the promise of transforming inequity, is more elusive for women than men (White, 2023). That said, given the predominance of White women in the PK–12 system (Zippia, n.d.), it is crucial to examine how their power and privilege through Whiteness, even within the scope of gender inequity, play out to impact equitable educational experiences for historically racialized and marginalized people. To grasp the paradox of being a White woman superintendent—holding power and privilege due to race but lacking the same power and privilege as a woman—it is crucial to explore the literature on gender in the superintendency, the invisibility of Whiteness, and how leaders are prepared to create transformational change.

By examining transformational leadership and the influence of Whiteness and gender through critical Whiteness theory, applied critical leadership, and emerging inclusive educational leadership theory, this study deepens understanding of how leaders—particularly those who have historically held greater privilege and power—can cultivate more equitable educational environments for historically marginalized communities. By narrowing research to gender, Whiteness, and leadership preparation, it is possible to determine how White women, in particular, can be prepared to be transformational leaders who create equitable conditions for students. This literature review focused on the following questions:

- What are the career paths women take on their journey to the superintendency?
- How do White women superintendents understand and navigate the intersecting influences of gender and racial privilege as they construct their leadership identities across their careers?
- What challenges and opportunities do White women superintendents experience as they lead for equity-centered transformation?
- How do White women superintendents recognize, name, and respond to Whiteness as a systemic force in the districts they lead, and how does this shape their equity leadership practice?

Understanding how leaders become prepared to lead for transformation and equity is essential. The skills, dispositions, and mindsets of transformational, equity-focused leaders must be examined through the lens of race and gender identity, and hegemony. To understand how White women superintendents perceive their roles as leaders for equity, it is essential to explore the dichotomy of power and privilege shaped by White hegemony and gender inequity. This literature review focuses on the impact of gender on preparation and access to the superintendency, the evolution of the understanding of Whiteness over the past 30 years, and the principles of transformational leadership for equity. This literature review begins by examining the discourse and research on women and the superintendency. The first area of scholarship examines the challenges aspiring superintendents face and the support structures that shape their leadership pathways, including gender disparities in leadership, the navigation of gendered expectations in PK–12 education, and efforts to create more equitable opportunities for women. The second area considers the often-unexamined role of Whiteness in educational systems and how it shapes the experiences of White women superintendents, including the movement from nonracism to antiracism and the complexities of leading for equity. The third area reviews research on equity centered transformational leadership, focusing on efforts to confront systemic injustice, reshape school culture, and mobilize collective action for systemic change. This body of research is interpreted through the lenses of applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness, and emerging inclusive leadership theories.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

As this study examined the question, “How do White women superintendents understand and navigate the intersecting influences of gender and racial privilege as they construct their leadership identities across their careers,” the existing literature was largely grounded in, or closely aligned with, two theoretical frameworks: applied critical leadership and critical Whiteness theory (e.g., Ahmed, 2004b; Leonardo, 2009; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021). In addition, scholarship examining leadership practices that support continuous improvement and systems-level transformation for equity drew on emerging inclusive leadership theory (e.g., Weiner et al., 2023; Young & Arnold, 2020). Together, these theoretical frameworks offered a comprehensive

lens for examining how gender and race intersect to shape leadership dynamics, revealing how deeply embedded systems of power, privilege, and bias influence the pathways, experiences, and leadership practices of women, including White women, as they navigate the superintendency and lead transformational change.

2.1.1. Applied Critical Leadership Theory

Using the framework of applied critical leadership (ACL; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012) provided insight into how a leader's identity shapes their leadership approach. ACL integrates transformational leadership, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory (CRT), highlighting the importance of identity in influencing a leader's understanding of diverse perspectives and power dynamics. By reflecting on their identities, leaders can adopt more informed and effective practices prioritizing race, language, gender, class, and culture (Santamaría, 2021).

2.1.2. Critical Whiteness Theory

Applying critical Whiteness theory (Owen, 2007), an extension of CRT, to the literature reveals how race, as a social construct, shapes society, policies, laws, and practices. This theory focuses on the power structures and privileges associated with Whiteness, seeking to dismantle them by making Whiteness visible and addressing its role in sustaining systemic oppression. It argues that White Eurocentric culture, which dominates Western society, often lacks cultural awareness, humility, and empathy toward non-White groups, reinforcing systemic inequities. By exposing the influence of Whiteness, the theory aims to challenge and dismantle these inequities, creating a more just society.

2.1.3. Emerging Inclusive Leadership Theory

Emerging inclusive leadership theory (Young & Arnold, 2020) reimagines conventional educational leadership, focusing on promoting equity, quality, and inclusion for all students. Inclusive education is a process of transforming schools to meet the needs of every child. When viewed through emerging inclusive leadership theory, it becomes evident that academic leaders must consider how identity shapes their leadership and how policies, practices, and conditions impact inclusivity and equity for students, staff, and families. Effective leaders must be educated and trained to view these factors through an inclusive lens. Young and Arnold (2020) identified three key areas for leadership growth that help address educational outcome gaps: place (environments, spaces, and hierarchies), preparation (education, mentorship, and training), and practices (dispositions that foster transformative and inclusive experiences within the system). Analyzing the literature through these three theoretical perspectives offered a clearer understanding of how leaders both encounter and either uphold or dismantle existing inequities within educational systems. This comprehensive approach highlighted the critical role of identity, power dynamics, and systemic structures in shaping leadership practices and outcomes.

2.2. Challenges and Support Structures for Leaders on the Pathway to Superintendency

The literature on gender in PK–12 educational leadership highlights that women have faced significant challenges on their path to the superintendency, often navigating barriers rooted in gender bias and underrepresentation. White women, while encountering many of these same obstacles, also experience a distinct interplay of challenges and privileges that shapes their preparation to lead as transformational superintendents. These privileges, linked to their racial identity, can offer advantages not afforded to women of color, yet they must also confront the complexities of leading with an equity-focused mindset. Empowering and supporting White women superintendents as equity-centered transformational leaders is crucial for fostering inclusive leadership and driving systemic change in education. Research as recent as 2001 has shown a persistent belief that men are better suited for leadership roles (Beeson, 2023). Although men still outnumber women in the superintendency, growing research highlights how agentic biases have contributed to the underrepresentation of women in this top PK–12 leadership role.

2.2.1. Gender Disparities and Leadership Challenges for Women in PK–12 Education Systems

White women make up the majority of PK–12 classroom teachers and middle management roles, yet women, especially women of color, are underrepresented in superintendent positions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b; White, 2023; Zippia, n.d.). The role of a superintendent requires a comprehensive understanding of PK–12 systems and the ability to create positive experiences for students, families, and staff. Although gender and race should not determine one's capability to lead, research has revealed that stereotypes and bias influence perceptions of leadership readiness. Although White women represent 58.9% of PK–12 teachers and 55.41% of school principals, only 26% of superintendents are women (White, 2023; Zippia, n.d.), and among those, only 9% are women of color (Cruz, 2023). The research also highlights significant geographic differences in the concentration of women in 500 of the largest school districts across the United States.

Based on the ILO Group Superintendent Research Project of December 2022, the regional spread of the 26% of superintendents who are women currently serving in permanent, interim, and outgoing roles was 49% in the Northeast (18 women in 37 districts), 37% in the Midwest (24 women in 65 districts), 34% in the Southwest (33 women in 97 districts), 27% in the West (40 women in 149 districts), and 23% in the Southeast (35 women in 152 districts; ILO Group, 2022). Given the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and the critical work required to ensure successful outcomes for students, it is crucial that women, after overcoming biases that often limit their advancement to top leadership roles in PK–12 systems, actively work to dismantle White hegemony and lead transformational change toward equity.

The superintendent role is well-positioned to change the systems of oppression that have led to the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite their aspirations, leadership capabilities, and

extensive knowledge within PK–12 systems, women—including White women—may encounter barriers preventing them from attaining superintendent positions due to the limited representation of women in these roles (White, 2023). White (2023) reviewed the names of 13,000 traditional public PK–12 school district superintendents to determine gender gaps within the superintendency. Although this is an imperfect way to determine gender (as some names are gender-neutral), the study revealed a persistent and significant gender gap across the United States, with some states exhibiting a smaller gap than others. In this study, White (2023) noted that women are more likely to lead larger districts with higher proportions of “at-risk” students. It is essential to understand this gender gap in the superintendency to make informed decisions about policies, practices, and training pipelines for aspiring women leaders in PK–12 education. She noted that no current national superintendent gender data set is 100% accurate, and one could be created to better understand where and what leads to these gaps (White, 2023).

White (2023) considered women’s access to the superintendency through Tallerico’s (2000) conceptual framework on the interrelationship of social and political influences on administrative job access. White explained that Tallerico’s (2000) framework indicates that an individual’s access to the superintendency can be depicted as a sequence of concentric circles. At the core lies individual agency, encircled by educational structures, professional norms, and overarching historical and contemporary sociopolitical frameworks (Tallerico, 2000). A better understanding of the possible reasons for gender gaps within the PK–12 education system is gained by looking at White’s (2020) and Tallerico’s (2000) work, with the addition of Young and Arnold’s (2020) emerging inclusive educational leadership framework. Young and Arnold (2020) argued that ensuring a high-quality, fair educational experience that promotes equitable outcomes necessitates a purposeful and focused commitment to inclusion. It can be argued that the lack of women in the superintendency is directly related to a deficiency of inclusivity within current sociocultural contexts, educational systems, training programs, and leadership standards.

Bernal et al. (2017) explored the perceived leadership qualities of superintendents and concluded that not merely experience but societal norms and beliefs contribute to the gender disparity in superintendent positions. This idea is further supported by White’s (2023) research, indicating that female superintendents typically have more years of experience in schools, especially as teachers. White noted that although women also make up the majority of elementary level school principals and also earn 77% of all education-related master’s degrees and 68% of all education-related doctoral degrees, they still do not rise to the level of superintendent at the same rate as men. Sanchez and Thornton’s (2017) findings aligned with those of Bernal et al. (2017) and White (2023), noting that although women are overrepresented in the education system, they still struggle to ascend to the highest levels of leadership within it despite having more experience, training, and academic degrees.

White (2023) suggested the underrepresentation of women in superintendent roles may stem from the prevalent positions men typically occupy in education (e.g., high school principal and athletic coach). There exists a sociopolitical bias favoring these roles for leadership preparation, perpetuating the perception that they cultivate skills more suitable for superintendency work

(White, 2023). Research on the superintendency gender gap points to bias and stereotypes of the perceived leadership qualities needed for the superintendency. Superintendents are tasked with formulating policies, ensuring school safety, devising and executing strategic plans and visions, overseeing financial, human, and material resource distribution, recruiting, hiring, supporting, evaluating, and retaining competent instructional and support staff, serving as instructional leaders, fostering effective communication, and establishing partnerships across school districts (Cruz, 2023). As noted previously, gender does not influence an individual's ability to perform this work. However, Gipson et al. (2017) noted that stereotypes and biases affect perceptions of men's and women's preparedness for leadership roles. It is essential to understand how these gender stereotypes and perceived competence influence the hiring of superintendents.

As noted previously, women, particularly White women, dominate PK–12 classrooms and middle management roles but face significant underrepresentation in superintendent positions, comprising only 26% of superintendents, with only 9% being women of color (Zippia, n.d.). Despite their experience and qualifications, barriers such as stereotypes, biases, and sociopolitical dynamics hinder their ascent to these leadership roles. Research has indicated a persistent gender gap in the superintendency, shaped by historical patterns of privilege and exclusion. It has emphasized the need for inclusive leadership frameworks that prepare women for effective leadership. However, further research is essential to understanding how these gaps affect the development of policies and practices that promote equitable access and drive transformation within educational systems. White's (2023) analysis highlighted that women often have more experience in schools, yet still face obstacles due to societal perceptions of leadership. The study called for reevaluating leadership preparation to ensure that aspiring female leaders are fully included and supported in their pursuit of superintendent roles.

2.2.2. Navigating Agentic Competence: Gender Stereotypes and Leadership in PK–12 Education Systems

Navigating agentic competence in leadership within PK–12 education systems requires addressing the impact of gender stereotypes on women leaders. Agentic traits (e.g., assertiveness and decisiveness) are often associated with effective leadership, but these characteristics can conflict with traditional expectations of femininity (Gipson et al., 2017; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jogulu & Wood, 2006; Rosette et al., 2016). As a result, women in educational leadership roles frequently face bias when exhibiting agentic behaviors, as they are judged more harshly than their male counterparts. This tension can create additional barriers for women seeking to advance into positions such as superintendents, where agentic leadership is expected. In addition to overcoming agentic bias, once women enter the superintendency, they are often tasked with serving communities in crisis, leading to further challenges. Overcoming these gendered expectations is essential for fostering more inclusive leadership pathways and ensuring women leaders can thrive without compromising their authenticity or effectiveness.

The superintendency requires a diverse skill set that includes maintaining a strong instructional vision, managing resources effectively, building relationships with key stakeholders, and

navigating challenges. The National School Boards Association (DiPaola, 2000) identified eight key action areas for superintendents and boards: vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Tailored leadership development programs for women are essential for cultivating the necessary skills for the superintendency.

Glass (2000), as cited in Muñoz et al. (2018), highlighted seven reasons for women's absence from the superintendency, including their lack of experience in roles typically leading to the position, such as secondary leadership, athletic coaching, or fiscal management. This lack of experience makes school boards hesitate to hire women for superintendent roles. Gipson et al. (2017) argued that selection criteria should focus on leadership qualities like self-awareness, adaptability, and alignment with organizational values. They noted that systemic barriers prevent women in leadership pipelines from reaching top positions, a sentiment echoed by Muñoz et al. (2018), who emphasized the misalignment between women's career paths and the typical route to the superintendency. Women tend to start as elementary school teachers and progress to elementary site leadership, and instructionally focused central office administrators (Muñoz et al., 2018). Research by Jogulu and Wood (2006) and Gipson et al. (2017) has pointed out that, despite agentic stereotypes suggesting men are more suited for leadership, women often score higher on transformational leadership scales. However, stereotypes associating women with warmth and communalism rather than leadership traits like agentic competence, which includes proactive behaviors, decision-making skills, and action-aligned goals, contribute to the perception that women lack the necessary qualities for effective leadership.

Rosette et al. (2016) further argued that racial and gender stereotypes influence perceptions of women's leadership suitability, saying:

White women were described most frequently (i.e., frequency counts greater than 10 with a total n of 32) as arrogant (26), rich (15), and ditzy (13). Black women were stereotyped most frequently (i.e., frequency counts greater than 10 with a total n of 40) as having an attitude (38), loud (26), confident (13), and assertive (10). Asian women were believed most frequently (i.e., frequency counts greater than 10 with a total n of 39) to be intelligent (26), quiet (22), shy (12), and family-oriented (11). (p. 436)

Gipson et al. (2017) called this paradox that women face in leadership the “double-bind” (p. 41), in which they are expected to exhibit agentic competence but are also penalized for displaying traits associated with male leadership stereotypes. This tension, along with ongoing gender and race biases, limits women's progression to top leadership roles despite their capabilities. Prejudice and bias often influence leaders' perceptions rather than objective evidence of leadership performance. Rosette et al. (2016) noted that when women display qualities closer to those assigned to males, they are penalized. Gipson et al. (2017) agreed and noted that women are expected to manifest agentic competence while maintaining warmth and compassion.

Along with the double bind lies another challenge: the “glass cliff” (Gartzia & Ryan, 2021) phenomenon, which demonstrates how gender and White hegemony intersect and affect leadership in educational systems. Building on earlier scholarship examining gender and

leadership (e.g., Gipson et al., 2017; Jogulu & Wood, 2006; White, 2023), Gartzia and Ryan (2021) explored what occurs when women break the “glass ceiling” (p. 69) and attain top leadership positions, including roles such as the superintendency. The glass cliff phenomenon contrasts with what men, typically chosen for their agentic competencies, experience. The glass cliff often leads to women being placed in leadership positions within schools that serve Black and Brown communities, particularly during times of crisis. This research confirms Bernal et al.’s (2017) findings: that women who become superintendents tend to lead large urban districts serving predominantly Black and Brown students.

Building on Bernal et al. (2017), Gartzia and Ryan (2021) deepened understanding of how leadership context and identity shape role expectations and constraints. These insights help contextualize White’s (2023) findings, which suggested that while superintendents across urban, suburban, and rural districts face significant challenges, the nature of those challenges differs by setting. This body of work helps explain why women are more likely to lead urban districts, where 26% of female superintendents serve, despite these districts often educating higher proportions of Black and Brown students and operating under more complex political, social, and resource conditions. Conversely, men are more likely to lead town and rural districts, which predominantly serve White students. Women superintendents are more likely to lead urban districts serving high-need populations, including students living in poverty and those experiencing trauma (White, 2023).

Gartzia and Ryan (2021) noted that communal traits, often attributed to women, are often preferred in leaders managing crises, such as handling personnel issues or periods of poor performance. However, this preference does not extend to situations requiring public spokesperson roles. This situation reflects a belief that women are better equipped to handle crises, given the historical inequities that have led to such crises in these schools. The research has been clear: women who break through the glass ceiling face the challenges and obstacles of the glass cliff—a precarious position with personal and professional challenges (e.g., stress, personal well-being, and limited career advancement opportunities; Gartzia & Ryan, 2021). Success in these uncertain contexts demands resilience, innovation, and psychological strength (Gartzia & Ryan, 2021). Given this insight, women leaders must be prepared to navigate these roles without perpetuating further harm.

Navigating the complexities of leadership in PK–12 education presents significant challenges for women, particularly as they strive for positions such as the superintendency. The interplay of agentic competence and gender stereotypes often places women in a vulnerable position, where they must demonstrate assertiveness while simultaneously conforming to traditional expectations of warmth and communal traits. The barriers they face (e.g., the double bind and the glass cliff) further complicate their journey, often assigning them to lead schools in crisis while overlooking their capabilities in more stable environments. Despite their qualifications and effectiveness, women leaders are frequently judged through biased lenses that limit their opportunities for advancement (Bernal et al., 2017).

Addressing these systemic inequities is vital for creating a more inclusive educational landscape that recognizes the potential of women leaders and actively supports their growth and success (Young & Arnold, 2020). By fostering equitable leadership pathways and challenging ingrained stereotypes, educational systems can empower women to thrive as transformative leaders, benefiting the students and communities they serve. To transform toward liberation and justice, PK–12 education systems must overcome these biases by recognizing that key traits such as collaboration, clear vision, inclusion, and partnership-building—often stereotypically associated with women—are crucial to effective superintendency (Gipson et al., 2017). To support women in attaining these roles, it is vital to remove biases and barriers and to emphasize the transformative qualities needed for leadership in fostering liberation and equity.

2.2.3. Fostering Pathways and Preparing Women for Transformational Leadership in the Superintendency

Women leaders encounter numerous obstacles on their journey to the superintendency, frequently confronting barriers rooted in gender bias and underrepresentation (Gipson et al., 2017; Muñoz et al., 2018; Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez & Thornton, 2017; White, 2023). Fostering equitable leadership pathways for women in PK–12 education involves creating supportive environments that empower female educators to pursue leadership roles. This process requires dismantling systemic barriers historically limiting women's access to advancement opportunities, including mentorship programs, professional development tailored to their needs, and initiatives promoting inclusive hiring practices. By actively addressing gender biases and promoting diverse leadership models, educational institutions can cultivate a culture that values and elevates women leaders. Additionally, providing platforms for women to share their experiences and insights, creating visibility of women leaders can inspire future generations of female educators to aspire to leadership roles. White women, while facing their own set of challenges, also experience certain privileges tied to their racial identity, which can provide advantages not available to women of color. However, they must navigate the intricacies of leading, focusing on equity. Ultimately, fostering these equitable pathways benefits White women and enriches the educational landscape for all women, leading to more diverse and effective leadership. Supporting and empowering women, including White women, superintendents to become equity-driven, inclusive leaders is essential for transforming the education system.

Superintendents play a crucial role in perpetuating or transforming the historically inequitable practices and structures within PK–12 education systems, necessitating their preparation as inclusive leaders (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Effective leadership requires the ability to navigate and influence existing policies and the commitment to dismantle oppressive systems that marginalize students (Young & Arnold, 2020). Aspiring female superintendents must be equipped with the skills and support necessary to confront the challenges posed by gender and racial biases in educational leadership (Bernal et al., 2017). This includes developing critical leadership qualities, fostering inclusion, and establishing mentorship opportunities that empower women to succeed in these positions (Gardiner et al., 2000). When examined through the lenses of applied critical leadership and critical Whiteness theories, it becomes evident that achieving transformative

leadership requires a deep understanding of power dynamics, acknowledging one's positionality, and a commitment to practices that advance equity and social justice within districts. Superintendents must be prepared to be inclusive leaders who transform historically inequitable practices and structures within the PK–12 education system (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Welborn, 2019; Young & Arnold, 2020).

Young and Arnold's (2020) emerging inclusive leadership framework highlighted that current educational leaders must intentionally focus on inclusion to produce equitable outcomes for students. This work necessitates that academic leaders consider how competing policies, practices, and conditions affect inclusive and equitable experiences for students, staff, and families. The disproportionate number of women becoming superintendents suggests that inclusive leadership practices are essential to help more women attain leadership positions and become inclusive leaders. From the emerging inclusive educational leadership perspective (Young & Arnold, 2020), leaders are prepared to lead through their experiences with place (i.e., environments, spaces, and hierarchies), preparation (i.e., education, mentorship, and training), and practices (i.e., leaders' dispositions that drive transformative and inclusive experiences). Inclusive leaders develop understanding through their experiences to focus on eliminating exclusionary practices (Young & Arnold, 2020).

Historically, preparation and access to the superintendent role have been exclusionary, leading to racial and gender gaps in the position (Snyder et al., 2017). Preparing leaders, including women, to be inclusive requires their full participation in the very systems that train future leaders. However, this lack of inclusion has resulted in the underrepresentation of women in superintendent roles and leadership research. To better understand how to prepare leaders to transform educational systems, it is important to review the literature related to training superintendents through the emerging inclusive leadership theoretical framework (Young & Arnold, 2020).

Beeson (2023) built on the research of Young and Arnold (2020) and Welborn (2019), emphasizing the importance of equipping individuals for transformational leadership. If women are to attain superintendency and be prepared to lead and transform the systems that have historically created inequity for marginalized students, they must be supported in doing this work in preparation and pipelines to leadership positions. Young and Arnold (2020) discussed that for current educational leaders to produce equitable student outcomes, they must intentionally focus on inclusion. This work requires academic leaders to consider how competing policies, practices, and conditions impact inclusive and equitable experiences for students, staff, and families. They must be prepared, through their education and training, to see these policies, practices, and conditions through an inclusive lens (Young & Arnold, 2020). This means they must see how their gender, race, and positionality impact their privilege and power as leaders (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). This inclusive reframe could redefine agentic competence in leadership, thereby altering how bias influences the appointment of women to the superintendency.

Muñoz et al. (2018) examined superintendents' responsibilities and strategies for establishing leadership pipelines that develop transformational and equitable leaders. The effectiveness of

inclusive leadership is influenced by factors such as relationship-building, fostering a shared vision, and empowering others to pursue that vision collaboratively (Muñoz et al., 2018). Leaders require formal and informal training to reach top positions and cultivate these skills, with mentorship being crucial. Sanchez and Thornton (2017) highlighted the importance of mentorship in developing leaders in PK–12 education, while Gardiner et al. (2000) pointed out that women leaders often lack mentoring, particularly from other women. Gipson et al. (2017) emphasized that despite the critical role of mentorship, the scarcity of women superintendents in PK–12 systems results in a limited number of female mentors for aspiring women leaders.

To create inclusive transformational leaders, preparation for the superintendency requires intentional training for women to navigate gendered stereotypes and build their capacity to be co-conspirators for racial justice. These programs should address challenges such as navigating the “double-bind” (p. 3) of stereotype threat (Gipson et al., 2017) and the “glass cliff” (p. 62) phenomenon (Gartzia & Ryan, 2021). Moreover, establishing active pipelines within the PK–12 system is crucial to increasing the representation in the superintendency role. As evidenced by the disproportionality of women in the superintendency, career pathways to this position are not consistently open to women based on several factors (e.g., agentic biases, perceived competencies, leadership development programs, and criteria for selection; Gipson et al., 2017). Rosette et al. (2016) proposed that examining specific racial and gender stereotypes across different aspects of agency can lead to a clearer understanding of how these biases hinder women’s advancement to leadership positions. Without clear, active interventions in agentic bias, policy, and intentional pipeline development, the path to the superintendency role will continue to elude women. It is also important to consider how to set women up for success and sustainability when they become superintendents.

Leadership preparation programs should focus on equipping leaders to operate effectively within existing systems while also challenging, reimagining, and surpassing them (Young & Arnold, 2020). Young and Arnold (2020) recommended fostering three essential leadership qualities: critical reflection, critical consciousness, and the ability to consider multiple perspectives. They argued that inclusive leaders must prioritize dignity, foster professional attitudes that promote inclusion, implement culturally responsive teaching and behavior support, and encourage a sense of ownership within the school community. However, Love (2019) has cautioned that women, particularly White women, who lead historically underserved communities should not see themselves as saviors who temporarily address problems only to leave and pursue other opportunities. Love (2019) argued that the education system is built on the premise that historically racialized and marginalized children and their families only need to survive rather than thrive. Love (2019) suggested that reform and inclusion efforts, rather than addressing the root causes of inequity, perpetuate the cycle of failure to serve the interests of those who profit from maintaining the status quo.

Love (2019) highlighted an important issue regarding the inability of educator preparation programs to equip educators with the skills needed to create stability in districts serving historically marginalized and racialized communities. Dee et al. (2023) noted that organizations such as the

Broad Superintendent Academy, which is designed to train leaders to serve historically marginalized and racialized communities, are not successful in sustaining leadership in those communities. With more women serving as superintendents in high-impact communities, it is important to be intentional in preparing leaders to serve, be inclusive leaders, and remain in their roles. Love's (2019) assertion that reform efforts must address the root causes of inequity rather than merely focusing on superficial aspects is emphasized by the minimal impact of Broad leaders on urban district outcomes, including enrollment, spending, and academic achievement. To create a lasting impact, superintendent training programs must prioritize sustainability and stability in leadership roles, especially in high-impact communities, and emphasize the need for intentional and effective preparation to serve these communities. This preparation should address the root causes of inequity and support leaders in their long-term commitment to the communities they serve (Love, 2019). By doing so, educational leadership can move toward genuine reform that empowers all students to thrive.

When applying the applied critical leadership theory lens to the research, it is clear that leadership training programs must also help aspiring superintendents understand how their identity shapes and enhances their ability to understand multiple perspectives, understand power, and ultimately focus on effective leadership for social justice, change, and antiracism (Santamaría, 2021). It is vital that women, once they have surpassed the bias that can impede them from reaching the top positions of leadership in PK–12 systems, work to dismantle White hegemony and initiate transformational change for equity. For PK–12 education to transform and achieve lasting equity, women superintendents must be prepared to collaborate authentically and act as co-conspirators in dismantling White supremacist culture within the educational system. They should strive to ascend to top leadership roles while creating opportunities for other women and historically marginalized or racialized leaders (Love, 2019).

Research on women's pathways into the superintendency, their success in these roles, and their capacity to challenge inequitable conditions in PK–12 education remains limited and warrants further expansion. This gap is particularly important given the predominance of White women in PK–12 educational systems and the central role they often play in shaping organizational priorities and outcomes. Greater attention is needed to understand how women leaders, and specifically White women, navigate leadership in ways that interrupt historically racialized and marginalized patterns of student opportunity once they assume system-level authority.

Scholarship on gender and educational leadership has consistently documented the structural and cultural barriers women encounter on their path to and within the superintendency, including persistent gender bias, constrained access to leadership networks, and patterns of underrepresentation (Gartzia & Ryan, 2021; Gipson et al., 2017; Jogulu & Wood, 2006; Muñoz et al., 2018; Rosette et al., 2016; Tallerico, 2000; White, 2023). At the same time, research on transformational leadership suggests that leaders who seek to influence meaningful change must move beyond technical management to motivate collective action and build the capacity of those they lead (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership emphasizes moral purpose and

responsiveness to constituent needs, positioning leaders as responsible for cultivating conditions that support sustained improvement.

When considered alongside scholarship highlighting how structural racism persists when leaders fail to recognize their own racialized impact (Allen & Liou, 2019), this body of research underscores the importance of identity awareness and critical self-reflection as core dimensions of equity-focused leadership. Although many educational leaders express commitments to fairness and diversity, organizational outcomes often continue to reflect inequitable patterns. Applying transformational leadership to the pursuit of equitable educational systems, therefore, requires leaders not only to advocate for diversity and equity but also to intentionally create the relational and organizational conditions necessary for systemic change.

Although White women also navigate obstacles, they experience a unique blend of challenges and privileges in their journey to becoming superintendents. These privileges, linked to their racial group membership, may provide advantages not available to women of color, yet they still face the complexities of leading with an equity-focused mindset. Empowering and supporting women, including White women, superintendents to serve as equity-centered transformational leaders is essential to promote inclusive leadership and drive systemic change in education (Beeson, 2023; Sanchez & Thornton, 2017; Young & Arnold, 2020). Despite a persistent belief that men are better suited for leadership roles, recent research reveals that agentic biases contribute to the ongoing underrepresentation of women in top PK–12 leadership positions, such as superintendents (Gartzia & Ryan, 2021; Gipson et al., 2017; Jogulu & Wood, 2006; Muñoz et al., 2018; Rosette et al., 2016; Tallerico, 2000; White, 2023). Women face challenges to become superintendents, and yet, more White women than women of color attain this position. White women superintendents need to be prepared as transformative leaders who actively work to dismantle the oppressive systems that have pervaded PK–12 education. To do this, they must recognize Whiteness not only as an identity but also as an ideology that needs to be challenged (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). This awareness is crucial for empowering White women to address inequities and promote social justice within educational systems. To achieve lasting, equitable change, it is vital to explore the transformational leadership practices that White women leaders must adopt to foster equity in PK–12 systems. However, understanding the nature of Whiteness is a necessary first step.

2.3. The Invisibility of Whiteness and White Women Superintendents

Women leaders face various challenges on their path to superintendency, often dealing with issues stemming from gender bias and limited visibility. Although White women encounter their obstacles, they also benefit from certain privileges associated with their racial background, offering them advantages that women of color do not always receive. To transform educational systems and achieve equitable outcomes, empowering and supporting White women superintendents in becoming equity-driven, transformative leaders is crucial. Empowering women in this way will help cultivate inclusive leadership and promote meaningful change within the educational landscape. This domain examines Whiteness and emphasizes the importance of White women leaders in PK–12 education systems, recognizing Whiteness as a racial marker

and the dominance of White hegemony. Understanding the concept of Whiteness and its impact on racism and antiracism is essential. In the United States, race and education are deeply intertwined, as the PK–12 education system is fundamentally constructed around the “racial contract” (Mills, 1997, p. 3), which defines society through the lens of Whiteness. Neglecting to analyze White hegemony in shaping educational norms and systems obscures its hidden effects and the influence of Whiteness on educational outcomes. Examining the literature on Whiteness and its effects on U.S. systems deepens understanding of how White women leaders can drive transformative change.

2.3.1. Whiteness in PK–12 Education: Unveiling Invisibility and Addressing Systemic Racism

Incorporating Whiteness into discussions about race is essential, as it often remains invisible to those who inhabit it while being starkly visible to others, revealing the pervasive influence of racial constructs within social and educational systems (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Ahmed (2004b) said, “Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don’t, it is not hard to see Whiteness; it even seems everywhere” (p. 1). Omi and Winant (2014) stated that because race is a social construction, the concept of race is metamorphic and filled with many contradictions. The evolving definitions and contradictions within the dominant racial group, Whites, are shaped by the needs of that group to serve this same group. Whole systems of governance—such as labor and political regimes—have been organized and structured to uphold the social construction and stratification of race (Omi & Winant, 2014). Race serves as an important social and organizational system that enables the dominant group to justify the oppression and tyranny that serves them. In periods of social unrest and economic decline, race has frequently been used to identify specific groups as representations of corruption and the erosion of national identity and values (Omi & Winant, 2014).

Social theorists of the 19th century focused on understanding the stratification of society but could not agree on the factors that enabled such classification (Omi & Winant, 2014). Over 100 years ago, W.E.B. DuBois began to name Whiteness and Blackness as social constructs, not biological traits (Omi & Winant, 2014). In the 1990s, a discussion emerged in higher education that framed race as a social construct and posited that Whiteness must also be named as a race within this social construct. Omi and Winant (2014) shared that in the United States, the dynamics of race and racism have been shaped by a long-standing struggle between White dominance and the resistance of people of color. The concept of race, evolving unevenly in the Americas from the arrival of Europeans to the present day, has functioned as a core organizing principle of the social system (Omi & Winant, 2014). The social construct of race has created at once the hegemony and the invisibility of Whiteness so much so that Whiteness as a race has ultimately been erased from conversations over the years, with darker pigmentation being seen as the sole marker of race (Omi & Winant, 2014).

The U.S. education system was designed to create inequitable conditions and outcomes for students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019, 2023; Mills, 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Initially, it

aimed to track students into two categories—what Thomas Jefferson in 1814 (Founders Online, n.d.) called the “laboring and the learned” (para. 3)—with privilege reserved for some and labor for others. Historically marginalized and racialized students were often placed in the latter category, as described previously, a practice Mills (1997) described as the racial contract. This contract has shaped society’s systems, mindsets, culture, policies, laws, and practices in ways that are racially based. Because schools have been deeply influenced by the social construct of race (Omi & Winant, 2014), they are steeped in the pernicious invisibility of Whiteness and White hegemony. White dominance and systemic racism make up the fabric of the U.S. educational system (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Allen and Liou (2019) posited that White hegemony has enabled White ideals of schooling to permeate school systems.

Historically, the ideals of educational meritocracy and the White Protestant work ethic have been used to justify economic exploitation, discrimination, and domination of people of color, while also reinforcing the legitimacy of White success and supremacy norms such as meritocracy and colonialism. This racial contract (Mills, 1997) has historically impacted every aspect of the U.S. educational system. In 1919, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, a White woman historian, principal of the Lucy Cobb Institute, and leader of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, advanced a narrative of “true history” (Case, 2017, p. 25) that systematically erased the contributions of people of color (E. G. McRae, 2018), producing distortions that caused enduring, intergenerational harm. Mildred Lewis Rutherford is only one example of many White women in educational settings throughout history who have used their positionality to propagate White supremacy. Leaders must understand the impact of the construct of race as well as their own racialized impact on their leadership (Allen & Liou, 2019).

Allen and Liou (2019) purported that one reason for the continuation of structural racism lies in the inability of leaders to see their own racialized impact. Despite many school leaders advocating for fairness and respect for diversity, the results achieved by the organizations they lead frequently do not reflect these ideals (Allen & Liou, 2019). Allen and Liou’s (2019) research aligned with the studies conducted by Young and Arnold (2020), Leonardo and Zembylas (2013), and Omi and Winant (2014), which emphasized that leaders must recognize their ties to the racial contract (Mills, 1997). They argued that true inclusion and the dismantling of structural racism cannot be achieved without an awareness of how they are connected to issues of racialization. Leaders must understand how Whiteness ideology and ideals impact their work. For school leaders, striving to improve schools through “effective practices” is inadequate if educators do not identify the sources of oppression and adjust their beliefs and skills to critically examine the underlying assumptions of curricula and achievement in every classroom (Allen & Liou, 2019). When leaders striving to dismantle systems of inequity fail to recognize Whiteness and the elements of the system that perpetuate White supremacy, the invisibility of Whiteness will continue to have harmful effects on Black and Brown students.

The erasure of White as a race has ultimately centered Whiteness in supremacy over all other races. White people must see the dominance of Whiteness and White as a race. Giroux (1997), Ahmed (2004b), and Omi and Winant (2014) argued that it is essential to theorize and discuss

Whiteness in ways that invite critical examination while also enabling White individuals to recognize their role in creating an antiracist society. White hegemony pervades all aspects of U.S. society. Helms (2019) argued that in exchange for abandoning, or appearing to abandon, their ethnic roots, successive waves of White immigrants have been granted access to White privilege by those already positioned within it, contributing to the omission or underdevelopment of a conscious racial identity. At the same time, it is important to note that Helms and others have at times conflated racial group with racial identity; for scholars of racial identity, these are distinct constructs. Building on the work of Giroux (1997), Ahmed (2004b), and Omi and Winant (2014), Helms emphasized that the failure to recognize Whiteness as a racial identity obscures its visibility and reinforces the notion that being White is synonymous with power. Whites actively working to dismantle the racial contract (Mills, 1997) means there must be awareness of Whiteness as a race and a commitment to being antiracist. When this research is viewed through the applied critical leadership lens, it becomes clear that White women superintendents who recognize their privilege and the hegemony of Whiteness are better positioned to dismantle the inequitable systems rooted in White supremacy.

2.3.2. Moving Beyond Nonracism to Antiracism

White individuals who understand themselves as “not racist” often fail to recognize their connection to race or racism. Trepagnier (2010) conceptualized passivity as a central component of racism, one that is closely associated with Whiteness. Although “well-meaning” White people may seek to avoid being perceived as racist (Trepagnier, 2010, p. 85), passivity functions as a form of racial harm by allowing inequitable systems to persist. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) further argued that the divide between White ideology and White identity perpetuates systemic oppression, particularly within educational contexts. They contended that disrupting these systems requires the creation of spaces for critical discourse that examines how White affective technologies and racial privilege shape educational theories and practices. Antiracist educational praxis, therefore, necessitates sustained engagement with Whiteness as an active and structuring force, given that “Whiteness is singular and consistent in its search to create a world after its own image” (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 153). Helms (2019) similarly argued that ignoring the role of race, and Whiteness in particular, forecloses the possibility of addressing racial inequities. She emphasized that dismantling White hegemony, or what Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) describe as White narcissism, requires recognizing Whiteness as a racial identity rather than treating it as neutral or invisible. Collectively, Trepagnier (2010), Leonardo and Zembylas (2013), and Helms (2019) underscored the importance of distinguishing between nonracist and antiracist stances as a necessary condition for systemic change aimed at dismantling inequity.

Utt and Tochluk (2016) considered that cultural humility and personal awareness, or a “third space” (p. 125) way of being, can impact how education systems affect student outcomes and success. Individual awareness is tentative in its process, and there are “fits and starts” as White people attempt to develop a sense of self as antiracist (Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Omi and Winant (2014) argued that being nonracist is often seen as an identity or even a badge of honor, while antiracism is more of a political commitment and active effort to address racism before it solidifies

into an identity. For the nonracist, it is about who they are; for the antiracist, it is about what they do. Often, “White intellectual alibis” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 150) align themselves as nonracist as opposed to antiracist. The mental, emotional, and physical embodiment impacts educational theories, practices, discourses, and social justice. Understanding how antiracist technologies are embodied requires unpacking what Omi and Winant (2014) described as “affective technology” (p. 151).

Helms (2019) described this “fits and starts” (p. 30) process (Utt & Tochluk, 2016) as the way Whiteness identity develops. Helms discussed that a healthy White identity develops in a two-phase process, which includes the internalization of racism and the evolution of a nonracist White identity. She argued that White people need to intentionally work against their tendency to be race-neutral or oblivious to their race and privilege, because Whiteness is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of White individuals within a society that upholds White hegemony. Helms discussed how White identity development comprises several schemas across two phases. In Phase 1, individuals undergo internalization through exposure to race, resulting in either neutrality or denial. This phase entails a conscious recognition of Whiteness and comprehension of its associated privileges, potentially leading to reality distortion. Ultimately, Phase 1 concludes with a reintegration process characterized by an awareness of Whiteness while still perceiving it as the central reference point for all races. In Phase 2, individuals develop a nonracist identity through the “pseudo-independence” schema (Helms, 2019, p. 30).

During Phase 2, White individuals continue to perceive Whiteness as dominant and positive but begin to recognize its imperfections. Although there is no internal or external pressure to shift their thinking, individuals may start to realize that this perspective does not negate the impact of racism or systemic oppression. The “immersion-emersion” schema (Helms, 2019, p. 30) marks a stage in which individuals take personal responsibility for understanding the influence of White hegemony and history in the United States. During this phase, individuals reflect on the significance of Whiteness and its role in perpetuating racism. Finally, the “autonomy” schema (Helms, 2019, p. 30) involves confrontation, inclusion, and collectivism as individuals confront biases, embrace diversity, and foster collective action. Helms (2019) shared that attitudes, behaviors, and emotions do not always develop simultaneously. She went on to name that disparity among attitudes, behaviors, and emotions can lead to higher levels of internal racial tension for an individual, that these phases are fluid and not linear, and that a person can be in any one of these phases/schemas at any one time and in multiple phases and schemas simultaneously (Helms, 2019). Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) described this process and phases as a continued disconnect between being a nonracist and enacting antiracism: “Working-class Whites and White women frequently act in concert with their racial interests, even if this means obfuscating an accurate apprehension of their objective class or gender interests” (p. 154). That said, they also agreed that for White people to move away from White narcissism, this process is essential. White people must adopt an affective theory of Whiteness that embraces uncertainty, contradiction, and discomfort not as ends in themselves but in solidarity with others, fostering genuine change (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). White educators dedicated to combating

racism might find the concept of White privilege unsettling; however, they may still engage with it when it suits their needs (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013).

Allen and Liou (2019) agreed that for leaders to dismantle structural racism, they must move away from their transactional role in White supremacy, critically examine their investment in and benefit from Whiteness, and adopt a critical pedagogical approach to evolve into leaders who embrace a genuine transformative mindset. This assertion raises the question of how White women educators, who have historically created inequity, can be prepared to transform their mindset and foster equity in the PK–12 system. Analyzing this research through the frameworks of critical Whiteness and emerging inclusive leadership theories highlights the necessity for White women educators to recognize their Whiteness and privilege. This awareness is essential for understanding their impact on educational systems and becoming antiracist.

2.3.3. Navigating Whiteness and Equity in Educational Leadership

Examining Whiteness through the lens of critical Whiteness theory, which stems from critical race theory (CRT), raises essential questions about the role of White scholars in addressing racism in education. It underscores the necessity for active engagement with race to challenge systemic oppression. Bergerson (2010) investigated this topic and asked whether White scholars have a role in combating racism in education. She contended that White researchers can strategically integrate CRT into their work to legitimize its application in the field. Trepagnier (2010) discussed how White passivity allows individuals to distance themselves from racial issues, and Bergerson agreed, stating that White individuals must center race in their lives and work, engaging with CRT both thoughtfully and strategically to promote equity and combat racism. Bergerson would struggle with Trepagnier's assertion that confusion about race often affects "well-meaning" White individuals. She argued that although confusion may exist, it does not lead to passivity as directly as detachment from racial issues does. Plummer et al. (2021) built on this idea, asserting that White women have leveraged their Whiteness to preserve their privilege. Considering the ideas presented in this research, intentionally focusing on White women educators and leaders can help clarify how to equip them to challenge White hegemony and actively collaborate in transforming systemic oppression within educational systems. For White women leaders to effect meaningful change in systems deeply rooted in White hegemony, they must acknowledge how their Whiteness has contributed to their privilege within these frameworks.

Building on the work of Leonardo and Zembylas (2013), Helms (2019), and Plummer et al. (2021), Deutschman (2022) argued that although White people can live in the United States without seeing Whiteness, this is not the case for those racialized as other than White. Racial awareness for White people comes when they are in proximity to non-White people and when they are faced with racialized social and political events. Deutschman (2022) focused on how White educators become aware of their Whiteness and how this impacts their work with students, specifically students of color. Deutschman (2022) noted that as educators in this study increased their racial awareness, they experienced a rise in conflicting and ambivalent feelings while trying to teach in ways that matched their newly gained understanding. Deutschman's (2022) study validated the

findings of Trepagnier (2010), Utt and Tochluk (2016), and Helms (2019) by demonstrating that the narratives shared by participants underscore the “development of racialized understandings” among White educators and the influence of their Whiteness on their role in education (p. 6). As study participants became more aware of race and their relationship to race, either through interactions with racialized students or through a sociopolitical landscape, they also became more confused about how to approach their work to support these same students best. During this process of racialized awareness, educators can also place an emotional burden on their students, thus perpetuating White hegemony in PK–12 systems. As White educators become more aware of the hegemony of Whiteness, they must actively work to avoid perpetuating harm to historically marginalized and racialized students. Applying theoretical understanding of the key operational features of Whiteness is essential for gaining the insight needed to create effective strategies to disrupt and dismantle its influence on contemporary social systems (Owen, 2007).

As White women transition into leadership roles, it becomes their responsibility to ensure that their awareness of Whiteness does not reinforce its hegemony. This involves acknowledging the privileges associated with their race and actively rejecting that privilege while also confronting the various forms of racism they witness (Bergerson, 2003). They need to consider race, language, gender, class, and culture, and reflect on how these elements of their identities help them understand diverse perspectives. This awareness leads to more informed and effective leadership practices (Santamaría, 2021). Moreover, when White women, who hold privilege and power based on race but lack the same privilege and power in terms of gender, assume leadership positions in PK–12 educational systems, it raises questions about how they navigate and address conflicting dynamics of privilege and oppression.

Research has indicated that White individuals’ recognition of their Whiteness can be complex. Once White educators become aware of the affect and effect of Whiteness, they must maintain this awareness and leverage their understanding of their positionality within PK–12 educational systems. According to Leonardo and Zembylas (2013):

The upshot is that as Whites become critical of Whiteness, they create the affective space for a politics of anti-Whiteness. Contrary to the impression that this move promotes self-loathing, a politics of anti-Whiteness is precisely the re-education of Whites for a world shared with the Other. (p. 153)

Consistently and vigilantly recognizing the pervasiveness of Whiteness allows White leaders to identify White hegemonic policies and practices within the system and work to dismantle them. To understand the effects of White women on PK–12 education systems, it is essential to examine Whiteness and its role in enabling racism or antiracism. When viewed through critical Whiteness theory, Whiteness is often invisible to those who inhabit it but evident to those who do not. Discussions on Whiteness and race have evolved over the past 30 years, highlighting the need for White educators to recognize their own racialized impact. Although race is a social construct, it is shaped by the dominant group’s needs, justifying perpetual oppression and maintenance of power (Ahmed, 2004b; Allen & Liou, 2019; Deutschman, 2022; Giroux, 1997; Helms, 2019; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Love, 2019, 2023; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014; Plummer &

Stepteau-Watson, 2021; Santamaria, 2021). Applying critical leadership theory allows leaders to grasp how White hegemony shapes systems, fostering awareness and providing insights into dismantling structural racism. Awareness and antiracism require White individuals to confront their privilege and actively work against systemic oppression.

The literature underscored the importance of White women educators recognizing their privilege to develop an equity praxis that fosters antiracism (Allen & Liou, 2019; Bergerson, 2010; Brown, 2006; Case, 2017; Deutschman, 2022; Giroux, 1997; Hayes-Greene & Love, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2006; Love, 2019, 2023; Plummer & Stepteau-Watson, 2021; Rosette et al., 2016; Santamaria, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012; Shields, 2010; Trepagnier, 2010; Utt & Tochluk, 2016). As White women become more racially aware, they must ensure their actions support historically marginalized students without perpetuating harm. This exploration prompts more exploration into how White women leaders manage their overlapping privileges and challenges within educational leadership roles and drive transformational change for equity. Specifically, it prompts an examination into how White women superintendents can be equipped to implement or influence transformational changes that address inequities in PK–12 education. More research is needed to understand how White women PK–12 educational leaders can engage in co-conspiratorship to dismantle racism and systemic oppression within educational systems, all while managing the complex dynamics of gender inequity in top leadership positions.

2.4. [Women as] Equity-Centered Transformative Leaders

Women leaders encounter various challenges on their journeys to the superintendency, often facing barriers rooted in gender bias and underrepresentation (Bernal et al., 2017; Gipson et al., 2017; Jogulu & Wood, 2006; Tallerico, 2000; White, 2023). To establish equitable leadership pathways, it is vital to dismantle the agentic biases that prevent women from attaining superintendency. It is also important to prepare leaders to recognize the impact of White hegemony within the education system and equip them to become inclusive leaders capable of dismantling systemic barriers. These barriers not only hinder women's advancement to the superintendency but also perpetuate harm to historically marginalized and racialized communities. By actively addressing gender biases and promoting diverse leadership models, educational institutions can cultivate a culture that values and uplifts women leaders and dismantles systemic oppression. Creating equitable pathways benefits White women and enriches the educational landscape, fostering more diverse and effective leadership (Bernal et al., 2017; Gartzia & Ryan, 2021; Weiner et al., 2023; White, 2023). Supporting and empowering all women, including White women superintendents, to become equity-driven and inclusive leaders is crucial for transforming the education system.

Historically, achieving educational equity has eluded the U.S. PK–12 educational system (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019, 2023; Mills, 1997; Owen, 2007). Despite various definitions of educational equity in literature, a common theme is that equity means treating every student fairly, particularly those who are underserved, by ensuring they have the resources needed to access high-quality educational opportunities (Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). This area

emphasizes empowering and supporting superintendents, particularly White women, as equity-focused transformational leaders. Transformative leadership requires leveraging data, listening to the needs of the community, creating a collective vision, and ensuring accountability. The literature highlights the significance of transformative leaders' awareness of their identities, privileges, and positionality, and how these factors relate to historical inequities (Ahmed, 2004; Frankenberg, 1993; Khalifa, 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Shields, 2010). Leaders must implement practices and create policies that drive transformational and equitable change. Understanding how leaders prepare themselves to drive transformation and equity is crucial. To do this, it is important to analyze the skills, attitudes, and perspectives of leaders who focus on transformation and equity through the lenses of race, gender identity, and power structures (Santamaría, 2021). This approach fosters a sense of shared accountability, ensuring everyone involved is invested in the collective effort to improve educational outcomes for historically marginalized and racialized students. By recognizing how their own identities relate to power and privilege, cultivating collaboration, and maintaining transparency, leaders can drive meaningful and lasting reform within the educational system.

2.4.1. Pursuing Educational Equity: Confronting Systemic Injustices in PK–12 Education

The persistent inequities within the U.S. education system have been deeply entrenched for decades, creating significant barriers for racialized and historically marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Love, 2019, 2023; Omi & Winant, 2014; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Fullan (2020) argued that for many communities, particularly those historically marginalized by race, class, and language, educational and social conditions are not only failing to improve but are, in many cases, deteriorating. He admitted that although it was not always clear how the “grammar of public schooling” (p. 654) was creating harm, it is now clear, and that this is a time that holds promise for actual change. Fullan (2020, p. 654) continued, “When you get majority bad, serious change may have a chance.” Tyack and Cuban (1995) stated that the conventional schooling framework has shown remarkable resilience. Welborn (2019), in her qualitative study of equity work in the Midwest, stated that the ongoing oppression of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds has perpetuated inequities in educational performance. To change this system of oppression, it must be understood; otherwise, inequity will be perpetuated (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2006) explained that efforts made to improve education are offset by the growing distrust and skepticism about what schools can achieve in communities serving children of color and/or students living in poverty. Love (2023) asserted that the current educational system cannot change without understanding the sources of persistent inequity.

According to the emerging theory of inclusive leadership (Young & Arnold, 2020), leaders seeking equitable change in PK–12 education must take a holistic approach. Inclusive leaders prioritize the quality of educational experiences and the achievement of equitable outcomes for all students. However, institutionalized discourses surrounding identities, differences, and academic success often lead to strategies that only superficially address inclusivity. These adjustments, although intended to promote inclusion, can inadvertently reinforce existing educational norms that

highlight otherness and perpetuate the marginalization of those they aim to support (Young & Arnold, 2020). This approach acknowledges the systemic nature of inequity and confronts its root causes. As echoed throughout the discourse, the status quo of the U.S. educational system is fundamentally flawed, perpetuating disparities and injustices (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019, 2023; Mills, 1997; Owen, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Nevertheless, amid this dysfunctionality lies the potential for transformation. According to Fullan (2020):

We have two things in our favor: a status quo that is blatantly and desperately dysfunctional and a set of ideas and practices that appeal to our learning brains and to our moral sense of what is worth fighting for. (p. 661)

Leaders must confront the ingrained mindsets and beliefs that uphold inequity and actively challenge the power structures that maintain the status quo. In alignment with the emerging inclusive leadership theory (Young & Arnold, 2020), Welborn (2019) shared that educational leaders should create opportunities where everyone to have a voice and share their personal stories or lived experiences to transform their mindset. Genuine change requires an understanding of the current system and a deep commitment to continuous improvement grounded in a clear vision of equity, strategic action, and unwavering dedication (Kania et al., 2018). It necessitates a cultural shift in which all participants in the education system engage in critical reflection, dialogue, and collective action toward a shared vision of justice and liberation (Welborn, 2019).

Given the enduring inequities in educational systems, particularly within the PK–12 system in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019, 2023; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014; Owen, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), leaders must actively confront systemic injustices, elucidate the sociopolitical context, implement policy reforms that advance equity, and seamlessly embed these initiatives into the ongoing operations of the evolving system (Love, 2023). The system can become equitable for all students when conditions such as inclusive policies, culturally affirming practices, and equitable resource allocation are present (Young & Arnold, 2020). To foster lasting change in PK–12 systems, leaders must adopt practices and attitudes in their change initiatives that prioritize empathy, collaboration, cultural affirmation, and a dedication to social justice (Welborn, 2019). In their study, Burns et al. (2019) emphasized that superintendents in transformational districts viewed their role as overseeing administrative tasks and as critical visionaries focused on supporting high-quality instruction tailored to diverse student needs across all levels of the educational system.

This aligns with the assertions of Tyack and Cuban (1995), Fullan (2020), and Love (2023) that although equity in the educational system remains elusive, leaders can embody some practices that lead toward transformation and liberation. Burns et al. (2019) named 10 practices associated with high performance in school districts that promote and lead toward equity:

(1) a districtwide focus and vision for student achievement, (2) clearly established and aligned curriculum and instruction, (3) use of evidence for decision-making, (4) a districtwide sense of efficacy, (5) building and maintaining good communications and

relationships, (6) investing in instructional leadership, (7) a targeted and phased orientation to school improvement, (8) job-embedded professional learning for leaders and teachers, (9) strategic engagement with the government's agenda for change and associated resources, and (10) infrastructure alignment. (p. 3)

By fostering authentic relationships, creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, and centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, leaders can dismantle oppressive systems and pave the way for lasting, transformative change (Yurkofsky et al., 2020). Yurkofsky et al. (2020) shared that for leaders to actively navigate the politics, incoherence, and conflicting demands typical of the U.S. education sector, they should develop magnanimous Continuous Improvement (CI) processes that combine both supportive and objective strategies and delve into the underlying, adaptive elements crucial for achieving deep and sustainable change. In other words, superintendents must create continuous improvement cycles that proactively manage the political instability, inconsistency, and conflicting expectations characteristic of the education system they are trying to change.

The U.S. education system has long perpetuated significant inequities, particularly impacting racialized and historically marginalized communities. Despite decades of reform efforts, many indicators suggest that conditions are worsening rather than improving, highlighting the urgent need for transformative change (Fullan, 2020). Leaders must adopt a holistic approach emphasizing the quality of educational experiences and equitable outcomes for all students. Current strategies often fall short, inadvertently reinforcing existing inequities instead of addressing their root causes (Park et al., 2023). To foster genuine change, educational leaders should focus on creating inclusive environments where all voices are heard and respected while confronting the systemic injustices underpinning these disparities. By embedding equity-focused policies and practices into their operational frameworks, leaders can work toward dismantling oppressive structures and promoting social justice (Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). This transformation requires a collective commitment to continuous improvement, critical reflection, and collaborative dialogue among all stakeholders. Ultimately, by centering the experiences of marginalized communities and prioritizing empathetic leadership, the educational system can move toward true equity and liberation for all students.

2.4.2. Transforming Education: Uniting for Equity and Systemic Change

As previously discussed, the educational system consistently produces unequal outcomes, upholding its original design. Leaders must acknowledge this reality and understand that true transformation requires a comprehensive restructuring from core principles and mindsets to peripheral elements. Reformers must challenge educational norms, collaborate with others to share goals, mobilize resources, and foster innovation and professional growth. They have to balance top-down administrative reforms with experimental approaches. Equity-centered leadership emphasizes a clear vision, accountability, and ongoing professional development as essential for achieving transformation (Burns et al., 2019).

Transformative leadership requires reflecting on policies, practices, and mental models through the lens of equity and social justice (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders must create an opportunity for this reflection to enact systems culture change within and across the education system. Leaders begin to develop their practice of “deconstruction and reconstruction” (p. 729) by evaluating and analyzing their current procedures and then reorganizing their practices based on a new agenda for social action (Brown, 2006). Hamandani et al. (2023) added to Brown (2006), sharing that leaders must create conditions for people to test the cultural norms of education that produce inequity. Hamandani et al. (2023) also cautioned that transformational leaders must remember that implementing psychologically informed change requires buy-in and engagement while encouraging humility, curiosity, and flexibility instead of promoting threat, loss, and competition (Hamandani et al., 2023). Brown (2006) urged that educational leaders within preparation programs and the educational system create the conditions for critical self-reflection, which enables participants to develop a heightened critical awareness of oppressive practices and recognize their responsibility to change them (Brown, 2006).

Park et al. (2023) built on this idea, arguing that leaders who create the conditions for critical self-reflection are “weavers” and “emphasize the interrelationship among mindsets and interpersonal relationships with tools and routines” (p. 18). According to Yurkofsky et al. (2020), this approach is more human, more attuned to issues of race, gender, and power, and more responsive to the dynamics and demands of public school systems—all of which are essential for contributing to a more just and equitable educational future. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) noted that school exclusions can be seen as expressions of Whiteness, highlighting the subtle yet persistent influence and power of Whiteness in educational settings. Ultimately, embracing transformative leadership empowers educators to examine and reshape their practices critically and fosters a collective commitment to dismantling inequities and creating a more just and inclusive educational landscape for all students.

Leaders must understand that enduring change requires a complete overhaul, starting from the mindsets that have created the core principles and extending to the outer technical details. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) argued that education reform efforts have failed because they do not focus on the root cause of the opportunity gap: inequity. Instead of disrupting inequitable systems and practices, reformers have layered programming over broken systems, perpetuating the inequitable status quo (p. 839). Fullan (2020) emphasized that overlooking political systems and policy contributes to ineffective educational reform. Tyack and Cuban (1995) critiqued reforms as insular, lacking political acumen, and failing to engage broader societal support. They argued that reformers must cultivate a social movement to drive meaningful change. Park et al. (2013) agreed, advocating for integrating continuous improvement directly into daily operations to achieve genuine reform and stressing the need for a systemic approach to transform work rather than adding isolated interventions. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) elaborated on the ideas of Park et al. (2013) and Fullan (2020), stressing that district and school leaders must demonstrate a commitment to equity by engaging in critical reflection, elucidating a clear vision, ensuring accountability for its attainment, and prioritizing historically marginalized communities.

Moreover, leaders must facilitate ongoing, equity-centered, research-informed professional development opportunities (Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021).

Research on systems change has indicated that leaders must first see and understand the system to create transformation (Burnes, 2020). Once the system is understood, efforts can be directed both within and outside to modify the policies governing resource allocation, thereby shaping the practices that influence the experiences of students and families, leading to either opportunity or adversity. Research suggests that leaders who practice applied critical leadership (ACL) prioritize race, language, gender, class, and culture in their leadership approach. They reflect on how their identities enhance their understanding of diverse perspectives, leading to more informed, relevant, and effective leadership practices (Santamaría, 2021). However, as Fullan (2020) argued, most reforms have failed to produce lasting change. To truly transform the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 1) and dismantle the inequities that have persisted throughout the history of education, there must be a collective recognition of the need for change to create social justice, coupled with the belief in the existence of a valid, enduring, and equitable alternative (Santamaría, 2021). It is imperative to conceptualize a shared theoretical framework or mental model that delineates the possibilities within a reformed educational system. Love (2023) called this “freedom dreaming” (p. 101), saying, “These dreams are not whimsical, unattainable daydreams, they are critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance” (p. 101).

Kania et al. (2018) argued that genuine systems change necessitates understanding the system itself. They advocate focusing on explicit areas for change, such as policies, practices, and resources, and addressing semi explicit areas like relationships and power dynamics, and implicit regions, such as mental models. They emphasize that recognizing and addressing racial equity across all system levels means transforming relationships among those who comprise that system (Kania et al., 2018). Park et al. (2013) supported this perspective, asserting that altering the system requires attention to both implicit and explicit components. According to Park et al. (2013), a systems perspective suggests that it is essential to change the system itself and the ways of working within it to achieve better results.

Furthermore, Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) proposed a four-cornerstone framework, wherein equity serves as the foundation, aligning students and staff and transforming teaching and learning while adjusting resources and policies to align with equity goals. However, they caution against addressing only one aspect at a time, highlighting the importance of a strategic and interconnected approach across the entire system (Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). Welborn (2019) concurred, emphasizing that educational leaders must recognize the ongoing, cyclical nature of cultural proficiency in systems change, as this work is never truly finished. The literature consistently has suggested that although not all components of a system can be addressed simultaneously, neglecting either the technical or human dimensions undermines the potential for lasting improvement (Park et al., 2013; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021; Welborn, 2019). Park et al. (2013) further conceptualized entry points to continuous improvement as nested and mutually informative rather than mutually exclusive. Continuous and sustainable

improvement efforts require leaders with an ontological vision of equity who create the conditions for transformation. This area leads to further research on what leaders do to cultivate an ontology of equity and develop the leadership practices and dispositions essential for creating equitable and enduring systems change.

2.4.3. Transformational Leadership for Systemic Change

For continuous and sustainable improvement, leaders must understand equity and actively cultivate the conditions that enable transformation, which leads to a more in-depth investigation of the specific practices and leadership qualities required to develop an equitable framework that drives lasting systemic change. A crucial element of this effort is recognizing that lasting change relies on effectively using data, actively listening to foster understanding, concentrating on fewer priorities, and creating experiences that reshape mental models, ultimately leading to changes in policies and practices (Park et al., 2013).

To nurture meaningful and lasting change within educational systems, leaders must implement strategies promoting collaboration and accountability among all stakeholders. Park et al. (2013) stated that enduring change means a leader uses data and effective communication strategies to enable all stakeholders to create a shared accountability for the work. Best and Dunlap (2014) said that to create lasting change, leaders must focus on fewer problems within the system and use a continuous improvement framework to test solutions to these problems through inquiry cycles. Any continuous improvement effort must be focused, look for the root cause, create clear goals and an articulated plan, and create time for implementation and reflection. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) agreed with Best and Dunlap (2014) and added that to create enduring change through continuous improvement, there must also be a focus on equitable outcomes. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) focused on the application of integrated comprehensive systems for equity, which they describe as a “systemic approach to inequity that addresses the consensus among scholars that inequities within education are indeed systemic, historic, structurally embedded, and supported by entrenched ideology” (p. 841). Their study found that meaningful transformation of practices requires that reform participants understand the reality they are working within deeply. This idea of focusing on participants’ reality aligns with Kania et al. (2018), who asserted that individuals within the system must address implicit mental models to understand the system’s culture and then transform it.

Schein and Schein (2016) defined culture as observed behaviors and implicit norms reflecting the group’s values through interactions, formal and informal rituals, policies, and practices. Skills, paradigms, and habits of mind are passed through the group explicitly and implicitly. Hamedani et al. (2023) discussed the concept of systems culture and how changing culture can drive changes in systems. Given that mental models are shaped by cultural context (Schein & Schein, 2016), bias, and experience, it follows that to achieve lasting transformation in PK–12 education systems, requires prioritizing the development of mental models that place equity at the core of the system’s endeavors. Yurkofsky et al. (2020) argued that creating systems change requires shared commitments, while acknowledging the complexity of achieving them because each

member views the system through their own ontology. Despite these individual perspectives, the system depends on the interdependencies among its participants. For enduring and equitable systems to take root, leaders must create conditions for practitioners to reflect on their mental models, collaborate, and agree that change must occur coherently across the system.

Shields (2010) discussed the impact of transformational leadership and noted that transformative educational leaders must navigate within dominant social systems while also challenging them, thus serving as advocates for change. Duffy (2014) stated that to create this transformational change, educators must shift the mental models that have led to the need for change. Duffy (2014) described how mindsets influence educators' behavior and strategies for how they do their work: "This interconnectedness and reciprocal reinforcement is unavoidable and powerful" (p. 10). Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) concurred with Duffy (2014), Shields (2010), and Yurkofsky et al. (2020), asserting that transformational leadership requires leaders to establish conditions for routines, shift power dynamics, and use inquiry to disrupt dominant narratives. It involves raising awareness and taking action by engaging the whole school community in discussions, investigations, and teamwork rooted in understanding systemic and historical inequalities. This type of leadership fosters a culture where teachers and staff consistently reflect on their practices and those of others and work together to promote fair and inclusive teaching and learning (Yurkofsky et al., 2020).

Transformational leadership profoundly influences leaders' grasp of the educational system's context and culture, along with their capacity to facilitate others' comprehension of these aspects and their role in advancing equity. When leaders believe the education system functions as a culture with specific mental models (Duffy, 2014), they can better see how the system comprises policies, practices, resource allocation, and power dynamics related to this culture (Yurkofsky et al., 2020). Continuous improvement for equity is not just about root cause analysis, goal setting, implementing actions, and reviewing these actions for progress. Continuous improvement necessitates understanding individuals' mental models within the system and providing the time and space needed to shift mindsets, enabling the educational culture to center on equity. Leaders must create the conditions for a common vision of what is possible.

Shields (2010) argued that to create enduring change, leaders must be willing to take risks, form strategic alliances, reassess and reshape their understanding of power, and move beyond a "fear of authority" (p. 570) toward a clear vision of equity free of oppression and violence. Thus, research on how culture can change could provide insights into how to transform the education system. Hamedani et al. (2023) asserted that because individuals constitute the system's culture, changing or transforming a system implies changing the individuals within it. They stated that it is crucial to remember that individuals create cultures, institutions, and organizations, and thus that these are not detached or abstract entities. Similar to Kania et al. (2018), they argued that surfacing implicit mental models is crucial for effecting systems change. Hamedani et al. (2023) had hope, noting many implicit norms have been suddenly under scrutiny, with signs of rapid and dramatic change. According to Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021), establishing a genuinely equitable system requires a fundamental shift in participants' thinking in the system's culture.

They advocated transitioning from deficit to asset-based thinking. Hamedani et al. (2023) agreed that people must actively alter their behaviors while working to de-bias and adjust institutional and organizational practices and policies accordingly. Yurkofsky et al. (2020) agreed and cautioned that the mental models creating inequitable educational conditions must be visible to create enduring transformation. Duffy (2009) agreed that for systems change to occur, educators must first unlearn the mental models they have used and learn new ones.

If changing systems requires participants to shift their mental models, what must leaders do to create this shift? Yurkofsky et al. (2020) argued that for improvement efforts to be effective, they must address not only data, evidence, and iterative cycles but also the relational aspects of schools, which can act as hidden enablers or barriers to change. Shields (2010) emphasized that dismantling entrenched ways of thinking requires the deliberate creation of new approaches rooted in equity. In this view, transformative leadership involves questioning inequitable practices and policies while engaging in ongoing improvement efforts to disrupt them. Brown (2006) similarly highlighted that leading for equity often requires a willingness to risk comfort and professional safety, even within the boundaries of formal roles, codes of conduct, and state mandates. Taken together, these perspectives affirm that leadership is driven by values and that avoiding sustained reflection and dialogue about race, poverty, and disability ultimately reproduces existing power structures and maintains the status quo (Brown, 2006). Kania et al. (2018) also noted that leaders must be willing to change power structures within the system, and that doing so will alter historically entrenched mental models. Hamedani et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of being mindful of power and status when focusing on culture change.

The discussion on equity in PK–12 educational systems reveals persistent systemic challenges. Educational equity, which ensures high outcomes for and access to high-quality opportunities for all students, especially historically marginalized and underserved students, remains elusive. Despite efforts to improve academic outcomes, reforms often fail to address the root causes of inequity and systemic oppression, perpetuating existing disparities. Transformative leadership involves creating inclusive policies, fostering culturally affirming practices, and equitably allocating resources (Fullan, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019, 2023; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014; Owen, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Leaders must engage in continuous improvement that integrates equity into daily operations, addressing the system's technical and human aspects. This approach is central to leaders' need to shift mental models and organizational culture toward equity, fostering critical reflection, dialogue, and collective action.

Leaders can dismantle systemic barriers and advance lasting educational equity by navigating political complexities and promoting inclusive processes. To achieve system transformation, it is crucial that leaders within the system fundamentally oppose White hegemonic leadership practices and actively foster the proliferation of new liberatory and equitable mental models (Brown, 2006; Burns et al., 2019; Duffy, 2009; Hamendani et al., 2023; Kania et al., 2018; Park et al., 2023; Shields, 2010; Welborn, 2019; Yurkofsky et al., 2020). For White women who possess power and privilege due to their race but not their gender, creating transformational change requires engaging in critical self-reflection and fostering an environment that challenges existing

mindsets to achieve transformative and liberatory outcomes (Brown, 2006; Duffy, 2009; Hamendani et al., 2023; Helms, 2019; Kania et al., 2018; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013), which raises important research questions: How can White women leaders understand the impact of their Whiteness and incorporate applied critical leadership and emerging inclusive educational leadership practices to positively impact educational equity? What needs to happen so that White women superintendents are co-conspirators in transforming systemic oppression within education systems and make space for more women, particularly women of color, to join them in top leadership positions?

2.5. Research Gaps and Limitations

White women do not hold top leadership positions at the same rate as men, particularly White men; however, they continue to comprise the majority of educators in PK–12 systems and have historically contributed to inequitable outcomes for marginalized communities (Bernal et al., 2017; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023a; White, 2023). Over the past 3 decades, scholarship on Whiteness and race has emphasized the importance of White educators acknowledging their racialized impact within educational systems (Ahmed, 2004b; Frankenberg, 1993; Leonardo, 2009). Despite sustained efforts to ensure high-quality education for all students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, equity in education remains elusive. Scholars have argued that public education systems, originally designed to preserve racial and social hierarchies, require fundamental transformation to disrupt enduring inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Mills, 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Women leaders face significant barriers on the path to the superintendency, including gender bias, exclusionary norms, and informal gatekeeping practices (Gardiner et al., 2000; Sanchez & Thornton, 2017; Tallerico, 2000). Within PK–12 education, White women navigate a distinctive intersection of racial privilege and gender-based marginalization that shapes their leadership experiences. This complexity, coupled with the historical harm White women have often perpetuated within educational institutions, underscores the importance of examining how White women can be supported and developed as equity-centered transformational leaders (E. G. McRae, 2018; Plummer et al., 2021).

Understanding Whiteness and its role in sustaining or dismantling racism is essential for analyzing its influence on PK–12 education systems. Critical Whiteness theory reveals that although Whiteness often remains invisible to those who embody it, it is acutely visible to those who are excluded by it (Frankenberg, 1993; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). This body of scholarship argues that race, while socially constructed, functions to protect the interests of the dominant group and to reinforce the retention of power through ongoing structural oppression (Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014).

Viewing the findings through the lens of applied critical leadership theory clarifies how White hegemony is reproduced within educational systems and how leaders can cultivate the critical consciousness needed to challenge and disrupt these dynamics (Santamaría, 2014; Santamaría

& Santamaría, 2012). Engaging in antiracist leadership requires White leaders to confront their privilege directly and to act intentionally against systems that reproduce inequity (Allen & Liou, 2019; Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Sustained movement toward equity and liberation depends on transformational leadership practices that White women must intentionally adopt to challenge entrenched norms and advance justice within PK–12 education (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Shields, 2010).

When examined through the lens of emerging inclusive leadership theory, transformative leadership is understood as the creation of inclusive policies, culturally responsive practices, and equitable resource distribution (Young & Arnold, 2020). Leaders must engage in continuous improvement processes that address both the technical and human dimensions of systems change, shifting mental models and organizational culture toward equity through reflection, dialogue, and collective action (Buchanan & Greig, 2021; Park et al., 2013; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021).

Holding a top leadership position in education while benefiting from the very systems shaped by White hegemony presents a profound tension for White women leaders. Transforming these systems requires confronting this reality and committing to sustained equity-centered action (Ahmed, 2004b; C. D. McRae, 2018). Literature consistently suggests that leaders must challenge the structures that have enabled some to succeed while marginalizing others, even when those structures have simultaneously constrained them through gendered inequities (Allen & Liou, 2019; Weiner et al., 2023).

Although research has emphasized the need for leaders who interrogate dominant mental models, policies, and practices through a social justice lens, comparatively little scholarship has examined how White women superintendents specifically enact transformative systems change. Further study is needed to understand how White women leaders can function as co-conspirators in dismantling White hegemony while also navigating gendered barriers within leadership dynamics (Love, 2019; Shah et al., 2023). Without this understanding, meaningful systemic transformation toward equity may remain limited.

The literature raises critical questions about how White women leaders navigate the convergence of privilege and oppression in superintendent roles. Preparing White women for these positions requires fostering racial consciousness and the capacity to interrogate how their leadership practices may either disrupt or reproduce harm (Deutschman, 2022; Helms, 2019). By consistently naming and addressing the pervasiveness of Whiteness, White women leaders can work to dismantle oppressive structures embedded in PK–12 education and advance more just and inclusive systems for all students.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological design used to investigate how White women superintendents in California navigate the intersections of Whiteness, gender, and leadership as they work toward equity-centered, transformational change in PK–12 public education. A qualitative life history design was selected because it captures the complexity, nuance, and iterative meaning making that characterize the professional trajectories and leadership practices of individuals whose experiences are shaped simultaneously by racial privilege and gendered marginalization. Life history methodology is particularly well-suited to examining the identity-conscious sense-making processes through which leaders interpret power, responsibility, and positionality over time (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Drawing on phenomenological traditions, this study centered on the lived experiences of White women superintendents and the meanings they attach to pivotal moments across their leadership lives, including career transitions, relationships, and identity development (van Manen, 1990). Ethnographic elements situated these narratives within the broader organizational, political, and sociocultural contexts of schooling, which are essential for interpreting the relational and affective demands, political navigation, and systemic constraints that emerged in the findings presented in Chapter 4 (Carspecken, 1996).

California served as the study site due to its demographic diversity and policy environment, which center equity more explicitly than those of many other states (Darling-Hammond & Plank, 2015). The contrast between a racially and linguistically diverse student population and a superintendent workforce that remains predominantly White and male created a context in which participants' negotiations of Whiteness, gender, and power were particularly visible. This context laid the foundation for the analytic focus reflected in Chapter 4's findings on identity construction, leadership isolation, layered positionality, and equity-centered responsibility.

Four research questions guided the study:

1. What are the career paths women take on their journey to the superintendency?
2. How do White women superintendents understand and navigate the intersecting influences of gender and racial privilege as they construct their leadership identities across their careers?
3. What challenges and opportunities do White women superintendents experience as they lead for equity-centered transformation?

4. How do White women superintendents recognize, name, and respond to Whiteness as a systemic force in the districts they lead, and how does this shape their equity leadership practice?

These questions directly shaped the analytic structure presented in Chapter 4, where findings are organized around identity as the foundation of leadership, the paradox of collaborative leadership enacted in isolation, and the layered interplay of race, gender, and power within educational systems.

3.1. Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in the understanding that leadership, identity, and equity work are socially constructed phenomena shaped by context, relationships, and power (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Because the findings emphasize iterative meaning making, identity-conscious leadership, and relational sense-making over time, a qualitative approach was necessary to surface these processes in depth. Life history methodology integrates phenomenological and ethnographic traditions. Phenomenology emphasizes lived experience and meaning, which is central to understanding how participants made sense of Whiteness, gender, layered identities, and leadership responsibility across their careers (van Manen, 1990). Ethnography centers organizational, political, and cultural context, supporting analysis of governance dynamics, community relationships, board interactions, and structural constraints that shaped participants' leadership practice (Carspecken, 1996).

Together, these methodological commitments created the conditions necessary to examine how White women superintendents construct meaning within systems that both enable and constrain equity-centered leadership. A life history approach allowed identity, context, and critical incidents to be traced across time. At the same time, phenomenological and ethnographic lenses ensured sustained attention to both internal sense-making and external structural forces. This design ultimately supported the development of the iterative identity-conscious leadership framework synthesized in later chapters.

3.2. Life History Methodology

Life history interviews enabled participants to reconstruct their personal, professional, and leadership journeys in their own voices. The life history interview protocol guided each interview (see Appendix A). This approach aligned closely with the analytic categories that later emerged in Chapter 4, including identity construction, long-term meaning making, relational and affective demands, and the influence of layered identities on leadership interpretation. Participants were encouraged to recount pivotal career moments, shifts in identity and self-understanding, encounters with privilege and marginalization, and experiences that shaped their leadership values and equity commitments. Life history methodology supported the emergence of findings related to the iterative construction of leadership identity and the ongoing sense-making

processes that guided participants' equity-centered practice (Goodson & Sikes, 2017; Seidman, 2019).

3.3. Participant Selection

Participants were identified through purposeful and snowball sampling to ensure inclusion of individuals whose experiences could speak directly to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The pre-interview email and survey used to support this purposeful sampling process are included in Appendix B. Eligibility criteria included self-identification as a White woman; current or prior service as a superintendent in a California PK–12 district; experience leading in racially and linguistically diverse contexts; and demonstrated engagement with equity-centered leadership.

This process resulted in a cohort representing varied district sizes, demographics, and geographic contexts, which later informed cross-case analysis in Chapter 4, particularly findings related to insider/outsider status, systemic constraints, and resource disparities.

Ten White women superintendents participated in the study. Table 3.1 presents participant pseudonyms¹, district characteristics, years of experience, and salient identities. Districts ranged from small suburban elementary systems to large urban districts serving more than 60,000 students. Participants' professional experience ranged from 29 to 43 years, reflecting a highly seasoned cohort. Although all participants identified as White women, several held intersecting identities, including LGBTQIA+ identity, immigrant background, Jewish identity, and first-generation college status, which informed their leadership meaning making.

3.4. Data Collection

Two rounds of semistructured life history interviews were conducted with each participant. The first round focused on personal history, leadership pathways, and early identity formation. The second round built on initial interviews and included tailored follow-up questions that invited deeper reflection on Whiteness, gender, power, and equity-centered leadership practice.

This two-phase design created consistency across cases while allowing for depth and nuance within individual narratives. It directly supported the analytic structure of Chapter 4, where findings reflect both participants' professional trajectories (Finding A) and their leadership experiences navigating relational, political, and systemic demands (Findings B and C). Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cleaned for accuracy. The semistructured format ensured analytic consistency while allowing participants to introduce themes that became central to the findings.

¹ To protect participant confidentiality, participants were referred to collectively as Superintendents and identified using pseudonyms. No identifying district or personal information is included in the presentation of findings.

Table 3.1*Superintendent Profiles*

Sup.	Pseud.	Pseud. district	Area	Stud.	Yrs	Id.	Deg.	Description
1	Colleen Meyers	East Bay Partnership Charter Network	Urban	3,000	32	LGBTQIA+, Parent, Immigrant	BA, MA, Ed.D	Equity-driven, instructional, inquiry-focused
2	Shannon Pierce	Harbor Metro Unified Schools	Large Urban	63,000	33	Parent	BA, MA, Ed.D	Purpose-driven, justice-oriented, reflective
3	Rebecca Dalton	Delta Industrial Unified	Suburban/Industrial	10,700	36	First-generation college graduate	BA, MA	Relational, systems-focused, values-aligned
4	Meredith Granada	Bay County Education Services Agency	Mixed County wide	210,000	29	Jewish, Interracial marriage	BA, MA	Emotionally attuned, collaborative, strategic
5	Linda Harper	Coastal Valley High Consortium	Suburban	20,000	43	Parent, Interracial Marriage	BA, MA	Visionary, community-centered, improvement-focused
6	Diane Whitman	Valley Terrace Union Schools	Suburban/Rural	4,976	31	First-generation college graduate, parent, and member of an interracial family	BA, MA	Relational, capacity-building, student-centered
7	Laura McKenzie	Foothill Enclave Elementary District	Suburban	857	37	Parent	BA, MA	Equity-focused, reflective, politically savvy

Table 3.1 continued.

Sup.	Pseud.	Pseud. district	Area	Stud.	Yrs	Id.	Deg.	Description
8	Ellen Foster	Bay Tech Unified	Large Suburban	35,000	31	LGBTQIA+	BA, MA	Data-informed, visibility-oriented, inclusive
9	Susan Greer	Central Valley Farmstead Schools	Rural	1,340	36	Immigrant, parent	BA, MA	Instructional, relational, grounded in lived experience
10	Melissa Quinn	Ridge High School Network	Suburban–Urban	3,700	30	LGBTQIA+, parent	BA, MA	Research-based, inquiry-driven, collaborative

Note. To protect participant confidentiality, participants are referred to collectively as Superintendents and identified by pseudonyms. No identifying district or personal information is included in the presentation of findings.

3.5. Data Management

Pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying information was removed to protect participant confidentiality. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study was obtained from the University of California, Berkeley, and all data collection and analysis procedures were conducted in accordance with approved IRB protocols. Transcripts, analytic memos, and coding materials were stored securely. A detailed audit trail documented analytic decisions, supporting the credibility and transparency of the findings presented in Chapter 4.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, inductive approach grounded in the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and was informed by Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory. This analytic orientation emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants and aligns well with the study's focus on identity-conscious leadership and iterative meaning making across superintendents' careers.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis to preserve participants' language, pauses, and emphases. Each transcript was read multiple times to

develop familiarity with the substantive content and the emotional tone of participants' narratives. Analysis began with open coding, attending to recurring meanings, phrases, dilemmas, emotional responses, turning points, and career junctures. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, codes were generated inductively through close engagement with the data rather than established in advance. The resulting codebook is provided in Appendix C. Participants' own language frequently served as the basis for early codes, including phrases such as "North Star," take up space, glass cliff, mine to do, "leadership is about staying in purpose," and "people assume a lot about me based on how I look."

Through constant comparison within and across interviews, initial codes were refined and clustered into broader conceptual categories reflecting identity construction, relational and affective demands, power, and contextual conditions. Focused and axial coding further developed these categories and supported examination of relationships among identity, emotion, and structural context shaping leadership practice. Throughout this process, analytic memo writing was used to document emerging patterns, theoretical connections, and tensions across superintendents' narratives. Memoing was particularly critical in tracing how leadership pathways unfolded within racialized and gendered systems and examining when and how Whiteness was explicitly named, indirectly referenced, or left unspoken across cases.

To support analytic rigor, data condensation and display strategies outlined by Miles et al. (2014) were used to organize and synthesize findings. These processes culminated in the development of the coding matrix. As analysis progressed, categories were synthesized into broader findings that reflected the layered and developmental nature of superintendents' meaning making across their careers. In total, 738 coded excerpts formed the evidentiary base for the thematic analysis. A summary of themes and their frequencies is presented in Appendix C.

These iterative analytic processes yielded three overarching findings, each with integrated subfindings aligned to the coding matrix: (a) Constructing Leadership Identity: Identity as the Foundation of Leadership; (b) Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: A Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency; and (c) Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, and Leadership. The study's theoretical frameworks, applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness theory, and inclusive leadership theory, guided thematic integration and informed the interpretive analyses presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Table 3.2 provides an integrated matrix of the thematic coding structure that emerged from the life history interviews, representing the analytic view from initial codes to clustered subfindings and overarching findings. The matrix demonstrates how superintendents' narratives coalesced around three interrelated domains: identity construction and leadership dispositions, the emotional and political demands of the superintendency and equity-centered work, and the layered operation of power across gender, race, and career pathways. Together, these findings illuminate both the inner work and outer conditions that shaped how White women educational leaders made meaning of their roles, navigated racialized and gendered dynamics, and pursued equity-centered leadership.

Table 3.2*Emergent Findings and Subfindings Coding Matrix*

Finding	Subfinding	Description	Codes included	Freq. (n)
A. Con-structing Leadership Identity	A1. Identity-Conscious Dispositions & Internal Work	Leaders engaged in ongoing identity work—reflecting on their values, positionality as White women, and leadership dispositions—and learned to “take up space” with purpose.	Warm Demander; Challenge; Knowing Self; Reflexivity; Take Up Space; Imposter; First-Gen; Values Alignment	106
	A2. Purpose, Vision & Meaning-Making	Leaders stayed grounded in a clear North Star, balancing urgency and coherence and interpreting emotional highs and lows as data about systems and self.	North Star; Urgency Balance; Highs/Lows	74
	A3. Relational Leadership, Mentorship & Trust-Building	Leaders-centered relationships—building diverse teams, cultivating trust, and drawing on mentorship and sponsorship (often from women of color) as critical to their development.	Diverse Teams; Distributed Leadership; Build Trust; Trust Instincts; Mentorship; Lifting Women	86
	A4. Nonlinear Pathways, Inquiry & Leader Development	Leaders grew through nonlinear pathways, identity-shaping experiences, and iterative cycles of inquiry and evidence-based practice, shaped by insider/outsider positioning.	Inquiry; Evidence-Based; Unplanned; Tapped; Insider/Outsider	69
B. Leading Collaboratively in Isolation	B1. Emotional Weight & Loneliness of the Superintendency	Superintendents bore the emotional weight of the system and home life, experiencing the role as both isolating and deeply meaningful.	Emotional Terrain; Resilience; Advocacy; Glass Cliff; Burn Out; Family; Everything for Everyone	79
	B2. Moral Imperative & Burden of Equity Leadership	Leaders experienced equity as a moral, identity-based obligation, internalizing responsibility for addressing systemic harm even as they faced resistance.	Mine to Do; Impact; Pushback; Change Mgmt	73

Table 3.2 continued.

Finding	Subfinding	Description	Codes included	Freq. (n)
	B3. Navigating Power, Politics & Structural Realities	Superintendents operated at the intersection of instruction and politics—negotiating board dynamics, unions, community expectations, and resource constraints within racialized and gendered structures.	Politics; Stakeholders; Staffing; Resources; Boards; Pipeline; Insider/Outsider	111
	B4. Building Collective Capacity & Co-Conspiratorship	Leaders intentionally developed co-conspirators and collective capacity, distributing leadership to share the intellectual, emotional, and political weight of equity work.	Co-Conspiratorship; Mentorship; Sponsorship	13
	B5. Building and Maintaining Trust & Long-Term Direction	Leaders continually negotiated trust while holding long-term direction, tolerating short-term conflict to sustain equity-focused goals across shifting political contexts.	Stakeholder Perception; North Star	69
C. Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities	C1. Gendered Expectations & Tone Policing	Women leaders encountered gendered scrutiny, tone policing, and credibility gaps that shaped how their leadership was received and how they saw themselves.	Gendered Expectations	43
	C2. Whiteness, Access & Risk	Whiteness afforded access, comfort, and legitimacy, and also created responsibility and vulnerability as leaders learned to name and leverage privilege without centering White comfort.	Whiteness; Privilege	36
	C3. Intentionality & Transformational Practice	Leaders acted with deliberate intent to disrupt racialized systems—restructuring programs, reallocating resources, and embedding equity questions into everyday practice.	Transformational Practice	11
	C4. Barriers, Gatekeeping & Glass Cliffs	Women leaders confronted opaque hiring processes, informal networks, and glass-cliff appointments that constrained access and heightened risk, even as Whiteness opened some doors.	Barriers: Glass Cliff	36

Table 3.2 continued.

Finding	Subfinding	Description	Codes included	Freq. (n)
	C5. Layered Identities Shaping Equity Work	Layered identities (e.g., age, immigrant background, Jewish, LGBTQIA, interracial families, parenting children with disabilities or children of color, or not being a parent) informed how leaders perceived harm, belonging, and responsibility within racialized systems.	Intersections; Identity	8

3.7. Trustworthiness and Validity

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic inquiry framework guided strategies to enhance trustworthiness. Iterative cycles of coding and recoding, prolonged engagement with the data, and member checks supported the credibility of the study. Thick description of participants' contexts and professional histories enabled transferability. An audit trail documented analytic decisions, coding iterations, and memo writing, allowing transparency from data to findings. Reflexive journaling and memoing were essential given the central role of researcher positionality in interpreting narratives shaped by identity, race, and gender.

3.8. Researcher Reflexivity

As a White woman superintendent with layered racial, cultural, and familial identities, I entered this study with both insider knowledge and racial privilege. Reflexive memo writing supported ongoing examination of assumptions related to Whiteness, gender norms, and leadership identity, ensuring interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives while situated within broader theoretical frameworks.

3.9. Limitations

This study was limited by its small sample size, California-specific context, and reliance on self-reported narratives. The focus on equity-oriented White women superintendents intentionally centered a specific group, allowing for deep examination of identity-conscious leadership while limiting generalizability.

3.10. Summary

This chapter detailed the qualitative life history methodology used to examine how White women superintendents navigate Whiteness, gender, leadership, and equity-centered transformation. It described the research paradigm, participant selection, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness measures, researcher reflexivity, and limitations.

The next chapter presents the findings of this study. Drawing on 10 in-depth life history interviews, Chapter 4 examines how White women superintendents construct meaning as they navigate the intersections of Whiteness, gender, and leadership in PK–12 systems. The analysis yielded three central findings: (a) Constructing Leadership Identity: Identity as the Foundation of Leadership; (b) Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: A Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency; and (c) Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, and Leadership. These findings illuminate how equity-centered leadership is shaped by the cumulative effects of professional trajectories, pivotal experiences, and evolving understandings of identity, relational and affective demands, power, and responsibility. Through participants' narratives, Chapter 4 demonstrates that equity-centered leadership is constructed through iterative meaning making that is relational, political, and grounded in commitments to equity and justice.

Chapter 4

Constructing Meaning Through Leadership Identity: Case Vignettes and Findings

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative life history study examining how White women superintendents construct meaning as they navigate the intersections of Whiteness, gender, and equity-centered leadership in PK–12 education systems. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 10 superintendents serving racially, linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse districts across California, the chapter centers participants' interpretations of their leadership experiences within systems historically shaped by racialized and gendered hierarchies.

Across the narratives, leadership for equity emerged not as a technical skill set or a static professional identity, but as an identity-conscious, relational, and iterative process. Superintendents repeatedly returned to questions of who they were as leaders, how they were perceived, and what responsibilities accompanied their authority as White women leading complex public systems. Whiteness was sometimes named explicitly, sometimes referenced indirectly, or left unspoken. This unevenness was not treated as a limitation of the data; rather, it functioned as an analytic signal of both the normativity of Whiteness in educational leadership and participants' evolving racial consciousness over time.

Meaning making was central to leadership identity development across cases. Superintendents described how early socialization into leadership, nonlinear career pathways, mentorship and sponsorship, and experiences navigating resistance, risk, and visibility shaped their understanding of themselves as leaders. Their narratives traced trajectories marked by insider-outsider positioning, glass-cliff appointments, and identity-shaping moments that required sustained reflection and adaptation (Beeson, 2023; Bernal et al., 2017; Tallerico, 2000). These experiences align with scholarship on identity socialization and equity-centered leadership that conceptualizes leadership as developmental, relational, and situated within power (Khalifa, 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Theoharis, 2007).

This chapter begins by describing the participants and the approach to data interpretation, followed by brief case vignettes that situate each superintendent within her professional, relational, personal, and district context. It then presents a cross-case analysis of Finding A, examining how leadership identity functioned as the foundation for equity-centered practice across the superintendents' careers.

4.1. Participants

As described in Chapter 3, participants were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling to include 10 White women superintendents in California who had led in racially and linguistically diverse contexts and articulated commitments to equity-centered leadership. The participants represented a range of district sizes and geographic settings, including urban, suburban, and rural systems within California. Contextual variation, such as governance stability, resource conditions, community demographics, and insider versus outsider positioning, shaped both individual experiences and the cross-case analysis.

In addition to shared racial and gender identities, participants described layered identities that shaped their understandings of leadership, belonging, legitimacy, and responsibility. These included first-generation college-going status, Jewish identity, LGBTQIA+ identity, immigration histories, family composition, and parenting experiences. These dimensions were treated as analytically significant rather than incidental, as they shaped how superintendents interpreted harm, power, and equity within the systems they led.

4.2. Interpretation of Data

The interpretation presented in this chapter is guided by four interrelated research questions and informed by applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness theory, and inclusive leadership theory (Ahmed, 2004b; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021; Young & Arnold, 2020). These frameworks shaped the analytic focus and organization of the findings. The questions were intentionally designed to overlap, allowing the analysis to trace the development of leadership meaning, identity, and practice over time. These questions form a developmental arc, moving from entry into the superintendency to identity construction at the intersection of

gender and racial privilege, to the practice of equity-centered leadership, and ultimately to the active engagement of Whiteness as a systemic condition shaping district life.

The analysis begins with women's pathways into the superintendency, focusing on nonlinear career trajectories, gatekeeping, and glass-cliff conditions that shaped access to the role. It then turns to how White women superintendents made sense of and navigated gender and racial privilege as part of their evolving leadership identities. From there, the chapter examines the challenges and possibilities superintendents encountered as they led equity-centered transformation within politically and organizationally complex district contexts. Finally, it examines how superintendents recognized, named, and acted on Whiteness as a systemic force embedded in district policies, practices, culture, and community dynamics, and how this recognition shaped their leadership practices.

The themes in this chapter and in the next are interpretive answers to these questions. They were developed through iterative coding, memo writing, and cross-case comparison. They are not exhaustive or definitive; instead, they reflect a grounded, theory-informed interpretation of superintendents' stories through applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness theory, and inclusive leadership theory, together with scholarship on identity socialization and social justice leadership (e.g., Markus, 2017; Theoharis, 2007). The cross-case analysis yielded three overarching findings: Constructing Leadership Identity (Finding A), Leading Collaboratively in Isolation (Finding B), and Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities (Finding C).

4.3. Case Vignettes: Bounded Leadership Cases

The 10 case vignettes that follow provide bounded portraits of each superintendent's leadership context, pathway, identity meaning making, and approach to equity. They are designed to ground the thematic findings in context and to honor life history methodology by situating leadership practice within trajectories, turning points, and relational conditions. Each vignette is intentionally concise yet detailed enough to establish the political and organizational setting, the leader's trajectory, and the identity and equity dynamics that shaped meaning making.

4.3.1. Vignette 1: Colleen Myers (Superintendent 1)

Colleen Myers's leadership journey reflects deep relational roots and a gradual assumption of responsibility shaped by long-term service, trust, and sustained presence within an urban charter network serving approximately 3,000 students. With more than 3 decades in education, Myers began her career in the classroom and advanced through both site- and district-level leadership, describing her entry into the superintendency as the result of consistent encouragement from others. She particularly highlights the influence of a mentor who is a woman of color, who recognized her leadership potential before she fully articulated it herself. As a White woman superintendent who identifies as LGBTQIA+, a parent, and an immigrant, Myers described how her layered identities informed her sensitivity to belonging, legitimacy, and care within educational systems.

Myers explicitly acknowledged the legitimacy and access her Whiteness afforded while emphasizing an ethical responsibility to steward that privilege thoughtfully and in service of equity. Her leadership practice was described as equity-driven, instructional, and inquiry-focused, grounded in values alignment and a strong sense of place. She emphasized relational trust, community knowledge, and long-term commitment as central to her approach, particularly in navigating complex stakeholder dynamics. Myers's vignette illustrates how longevity, identity-conscious reflection, and relational credibility shaped equity leadership beyond formal authority, positioning leadership as an earned and evolving responsibility rather than a positional entitlement.

4.3.2. Vignette 2: Shannon Pierce (Superintendent 2)

Shannon Pierce's leadership identity was forged early in racially diverse schools and refined through sustained engagement with identity-conscious leadership practice across a 33-year career in a large urban district serving approximately 63,000 students. Advancing through teaching, site leadership, and multiple central office roles within the same system, Pierce developed a systems-level orientation grounded in coherence, accountability, and moral clarity. As a White woman superintendent and parent, she described becoming increasingly explicit about how both gender and Whiteness shaped institutional norms, power dynamics, and decision-making processes.

Pierce reflected on navigating gendered expectations throughout her career, including experiences of being diminished, overlooked, or expected to lead relationally without corresponding authority, particularly within male-dominated and White-dominant leadership cultures. These experiences sharpened her awareness of how gender and race intersect to shape legitimacy, voice, and influence in executive roles. Rather than retreating from these dynamics, Pierce positioned herself as responsible for naming and disrupting White-dominant and patriarchal systems, rather than operating within them uncritically.

She described intentionally leveraging positional authority to redistribute power, elevate leaders of color, align governance structures with equity commitments, and explicitly center Black students in district priorities. Her leadership was characterized as purpose-driven, justice-oriented, and deeply reflective, with a strong emphasis on sustained community engagement, policy coherence, and organizational learning. Pierce's vignette illustrates equity leadership as an intentional, ongoing practice rooted in disciplined self-reflection, gendered and racialized awareness, and collective accountability.

4.3.3. Vignette 3: Rebecca Dalton (Superintendent 3)

Rebecca Dalton's pathway to the superintendency reflects deliberate preparation, mentorship, and sustained tenure within a suburban-industrial district serving approximately 10,700 students. A first-generation college graduate with more than 3 decades in education, Dalton described mentors, many of whom were of color, who "planted seeds" at pivotal moments, encouraging her

to recognize leadership potential before she fully claimed it herself. Her trajectory was marked by relational sponsorship and values alignment rather than linear advancement.

As a White woman superintendent in a racially diverse district, Dalton recognized that Whiteness conferred institutional legitimacy, while gender shaped how others interpreted her decisiveness and urgency. She described navigating these dynamics through persistence, relational leadership, and a clear moral commitment to students. Dalton characterized her leadership as relational, systems-focused, and grounded in values, emphasizing trust, coherence, and long-term improvement. Her vignette highlights how identity, sponsorship, and first-generation status intersect to shape an equity-centered leadership approach built over time.

4.3.4. Vignette 4: Meredith Granada (Superintendent 4)

Meredith Granada entered the superintendency after extensive experience in instructional leadership and district-level systems work, serving in a large, mixed countywide education services agency that supports approximately 210,000 students. With nearly 3 decades in education, Granada brought a strategic, system-oriented perspective shaped by work across multiple districts and policy environments. She described stepping into the superintendent role with a strong sense of alignment and coherence, alongside an acute awareness of how institutional norms and public perception shape authority and decision making.

As a White Jewish woman in an interracial marriage, Granada reflected on how her identity informed her emotional attunement, collaborative stance, and sensitivity to power dynamics. Central to this reflection was the complexity of her last name, which she adopted upon marriage and has used professionally throughout her leadership career. Granada described how her last name, often interpreted as culturally or racially ambiguous, shaped how others perceived her in educational and political spaces. These perceptions sometimes led to assumptions about her cultural affiliation or insider status that did not fully align with her lived identity. She spoke about the ethical tension this created, including concerns about how she was being read and the potential implications of that perception in her leadership role. This dynamic prompted ongoing reflection on the intersection between how she is racially identified by others and how she understands and claims her own racial identity, particularly when community members ascribed racial meaning or credibility that did not align with her lived experience. Rather than minimizing this complexity, she framed it as part of her responsibility to lead with integrity, transparency, and sustained reflexivity about how identity, privilege, and representation operate within systems of power.

More broadly, Granada described experiencing both access and scrutiny as a woman leader, including gendered expectations to balance decisiveness with approachability and emotional labor with authority. Her leadership approach was characterized as emotionally attuned, collaborative, and strategic, emphasizing alignment across systems and sustained support for site leaders navigating complex policy demands. Granada's vignette foregrounds how system-

level expertise, gendered leadership expectations, and racially inflected perceptions of identity collectively shaped her equity leadership across organizational layers.

4.3.5. Vignette 5: Linda Harper (Superintendent 5)

Linda Harper served as superintendent in a suburban district serving approximately 20,000 students. Her 43-year career began as a bilingual paraeducator and progressed through teaching and site leadership within the same community. As a White woman, parent, and member of an interracial marriage, Harper described the superintendency as an extension of deep relational ties to the district rather than a departure from them. Having grown up, worked, and raised a family in the community, she entered the role as a deeply embedded insider, known personally and professionally by families, staff, board members, and civic leaders. Her longstanding presence generated significant relational capital, informal influence, and credibility, allowing her to navigate complex political and organizational dynamics with access unavailable to external leaders. At the same time, this insider status intensified scrutiny and constrained anonymity, as decisions were interpreted through layers of shared history, loyalty, and expectation.

Harper described how insider status required constant boundary management, particularly when personal relationships risked being conflated with preferential treatment or special access. She noted that leading from within demanded heightened transparency, consistency, and moral clarity, as trust was both her greatest asset and most fragile resource. Although insider legitimacy enabled stability and continuity, it also amplified the emotional labor of leadership, as conflict and change unfolded within relationships that predated her formal authority.

Harper characterized her leadership as visionary, community-centered, and improvement-focused, emphasizing care, stability, and stewardship. She acknowledged racial privilege while grounding her practice in a profound sense of responsibility to students and families she had long served. Harper's vignette underscores place-based leadership and illustrates how trust, continuity, and relational legitimacy functioned as central equity conditions, shaping both the possibilities and limits of equity-centered leadership.

4.3.6. Vignette 6: Diane Whitman (Superintendent 6)

Diane Whitman's leadership journey reflects both adaptability and a nonlinear path, including a period in which she stepped away from the superintendency and later returned to the role. Her experience spans instructional, special education, and central office leadership across suburban–rural districts serving approximately 5,000 students. A first-generation college graduate, parent, and member of an interracial family, Whitman described how her layered identities shaped her attention to access, belonging, and the often invisible work of navigating systems on behalf of students and families. Parenthood further deepened her awareness of how policies and practices are experienced at the ground level, informing a leadership stance grounded in empathy, responsiveness, and advocacy.

Whitman's early service in a combined superintendent–principal role required her to balance strategic leadership with day-to-day operational demands, reinforcing the importance of coherence, role clarity, and trust in small systems with limited capacity. After stepping away from the superintendency to work in other leadership roles, she later returned to the position in a larger and more complex district context. In this second tenure, she described encountering heightened community scrutiny, shifting expectations, and more visible manifestations of inequity, particularly for multilingual learners and students with disabilities. This transition surfaced tensions between personalization and scale, as well as the need to shift from direct problem solving toward building systems and leadership capacity beyond herself.

Across contexts, Whitman characterized her leadership as relational, capacity building, and student centered, emphasizing distributed leadership, collective problem solving, and shared accountability. She described intentionally cultivating leadership among principals and central office staff to ensure that equity efforts were sustained beyond any one individual. Whitman's vignette illustrates how stepping away from and returning to the superintendency, combined with her diverse professional roles and identity awareness, contributed to an adaptive, system-building approach to equity leadership, particularly in settings where resources are constrained and needs are increasingly complex.

4.3.7. Vignette 7: Laura McKenzie (Superintendent 7)

Laura McKenzie entered the superintendency with decades of instructional expertise and a deep commitment to teaching and learning, leading a small suburban elementary district serving fewer than 1,000 students. With nearly 4 decades in education and as a parent within a dual-career household, McKenzie's early tenure unfolded at the intersection of professional crisis and family responsibility. In addition to parenting, she served as a foster parent to children of color, an experience that brought her into close proximity with the intersecting demands of education, social services, and family systems. Inheriting severe fiscal instability in her superintendency placed her leadership under intense public and political scrutiny. At the same time, her family responsibilities heightened her sensitivity to how district decisions reverberate beyond schools and into homes, particularly for families navigating instability and vulnerability.

McKenzie described how parenting and foster caregiving shaped her leadership stance and threshold for risk and responsibility. Although she did not frame her role as a parent advocate within special education, her extensive background in instructional leadership and her caregiving experiences sharpened her awareness of how disability, trauma, and access intersect within school systems. These experiences reinforced a decision-making posture oriented toward stability, clarity, and ethical stewardship during fiscal recovery, as she sought to protect instructional quality, staff capacity, and student supports during a period of acute constraint. She also noted that these pressures were compounded by gendered expectations that women leaders absorb crisis while maintaining family and emotional equilibrium, expectations she believed were less frequently applied to male leaders.

As fiscal conditions stabilized, McKenzie recentered instructional coherence and literacy reform, drawing on a reflective, relational, and politically astute leadership approach shaped by years of balancing professional authority with complex caregiving and family responsibilities. Her vignette illustrates how family structure and lived proximity to vulnerability informed her prioritization, sustainability, and restraint as a leader. It underscores how crisis leadership, or glass cliff leadership, amplifies gendered expectations and tests endurance, particularly for women leading high-visibility, resource-constrained systems.

4.3.8. Vignette 8: Ellen Foster (Superintendent 8)

Ellen Foster's superintendency unfolded within a large suburban district serving approximately 35,000 students and was shaped by her position as an organizational outsider entering a politically complex system. With more than 3 decades in education, Foster assumed the role following a long-serving male predecessor whose tenure had established informal power structures, expectations, and loyalties that were not easily disrupted. She entered a context marked by a divided board, unresolved conflict, and heightened scrutiny, where legitimacy was not automatically conferred but had to be continually negotiated.

As a White LGBTQIA+ superintendent, Foster noted that her sexual identity itself was not a source of overt conflict or resistance within the district. Instead, she described how her outsider status was more acutely shaped by perceptions tied to family structure, particularly the fact that she was not a parent. In a community where parenthood functioned as a marker of credibility and belonging, Foster experienced implicit questioning of her understanding of students' and families' needs, despite her extensive professional expertise. This dynamic compounded existing challenges related to governance instability and contributed to ongoing legitimacy gaps.

Foster further described how gendered micromanagement and expectations for performative visibility conflicted with her data-informed, inclusive leadership orientation. Without the relational capital afforded to insiders or parent-leaders, she found herself navigating heightened scrutiny and political pressure that limited her ability to lead coherently and sustainably. Over time, the cumulative emotional and political toll led her to leave the role. Foster's vignette highlights how outsider status, governance culture, gender, and family identity intersect to shape superintendent sustainability, underscoring how informal norms of belonging can constrain equity-oriented leadership even in the absence of explicit bias.

4.3.9. Vignette 9: Susan Greer (Superintendent 9)

Susan Greer's path to the superintendency was shaped by persistence, repeated finalist experiences, and eventual selection through a relationally grounded hiring process in a rural district serving approximately 1,340 students. A first-generation American who began school as an English learner and later became a parent, Greer reflected on how her early linguistic marginalization and family responsibilities shaped empathy for students and families navigating access and belonging. At the same time, she explicitly acknowledged that her Whiteness

conferred credibility and institutional access that eased her navigation of leadership systems in ways not available to leaders of color.

Greer described navigating gendered hiring dynamics in which she felt pressure to demonstrate competence, seriousness, and readiness more explicitly than her male counterparts, particularly in short-format interviews. After multiple experiences finishing as a finalist but not being selected, often in favor of men, she came to understand the importance of relational fit and perceived likeability alongside qualifications. An all-day interview process ultimately allowed her to present herself more fully, enabling decision makers to see her leadership style, values, and authenticity rather than only her résumé.

Her leadership approach was instructional, relational, and grounded in lived experience, emphasizing trust building, coherence, and sustained presence in a close-knit community with deep historical roots. As an outsider to that community, Greer recognized that legitimacy had to be earned over time through consistency, visibility, and follow-through. Her vignette foregrounds resilience, relational credibility, and self-awareness as essential tools for navigating superintendent selection and practice in rural contexts with limited margin for error, where leadership sustainability depends as much on trust and belonging as on technical expertise.

4.3.10. Vignette 10: Melissa Quinn (Superintendent 10)

Melissa Quinn's leadership narrative centers the intersection of Whiteness, access, and ongoing identity reflection within a suburban–urban network serving approximately 3,700 students. With 30 years in education and experience across district roles, Quinn described coming to understand how systems were designed to work in her favor and how that realization reshaped her leadership practice.

As a White LGBTQIA+ superintendent and parent, Quinn emphasized leveraging positional privilege in service of students of color while remaining accountable for continued learning. Her leadership was characterized as research based, inquiry driven, and collaborative, grounded in disciplined reflection and data-informed decision making. Quinn's vignette highlights the evolution of racial consciousness and the ethical responsibility White women leaders carry when leading for equity.

The 10 vignettes illustrate leadership as lived experience rather than abstract role. Each superintendent's story reflects a distinct district context, career pathway, and constellation of identities, yet across the cases, common patterns in meaning making begin to surface. Although the vignettes foreground individual trajectories, they also reveal shared processes through which White women superintendents came to understand their authority, responsibilities, and positionality within racially and gendered systems. Moving from these bounded case narratives to cross-case analysis makes visible how leadership identity was not fixed at entry into the superintendency but continually constructed through reflection, relationships, opportunity, and constraint. The analysis that follows synthesizes these patterns across all 10 cases, beginning

with Finding A, which examines how leadership identity itself functioned as the foundation for equity-centered practice across superintendents' careers.

4.4. Finding A: Constructing Leadership Identity: Identity as the Foundation of Leadership

Finding A examines how superintendents constructed their leadership identities across their careers through internal identity work, evolving purpose and vision, relational leadership, and nonlinear pathways of professional and personal growth (see Table 4.1). Rather than describing leadership as a set of technical skills, superintendents framed it as a way of being rooted in self-awareness, authenticity, and a persistent, equity-centered North Star.

Table 4.1

Emergent Finding A Coding Matrix

Finding	Subfinding	Description	Codes	Total Freq. (n)
A. Constructing Leadership Identity	A1. Internal Identity Work & Leadership Dispositions	Leaders reflect on their values and identities, shaping how they show up and lead with purpose.	Warm Demander; Challenge; Knowing Self; Reflexivity; Take Up Space; Imposter; First-Gen; Values Alignment	106
	A2. Purpose, Vision & Meaning-Making	Leaders stay grounded in long-term vision, balancing urgency with coherence and meaning-making.	North Star; Urgency Balance; Highs/Lows	74
	A3. Relational Leadership & Trust-Building	Leaders center relationships—building strong teams, trust, mentorship, and sponsorship.	Diverse Teams; Distributed Leadership; Build Trust; Trust Instincts; Mentorship; Lifting Women	86
	A4. Pathways, Learning & Leader Development	Leaders grow through nonlinear pathways, learning cycles, and inquiry-based practice.	Inquiry; Evidence-Based; Unplanned; Tapped; Insider/Outsider	69

Subfindings A1 (Identity-Conscious Dispositions and Internal Work), A2 (Purpose, Vision, and Meaning Making), A3 (Relational Leadership, Mentorship, and Trust Building), and A4 (Nonlinear

Pathways, Inquiry, and Leader Development) illustrate how leadership identity was continuously shaped over time through reflection on positionality, relational engagement, and sustained inquiry. Collectively, these subfindings spoke most directly to Research Question 1 by illuminating the varied and nonlinear career pathways women followed on their journeys to the superintendency and to Research Question 2 by revealing how White women superintendents experienced and navigated gender, Whiteness, and racial privilege, making sense of these dynamics as integral to the development of their leadership identities and equity commitments.

4.4.1.A1. Identity-Conscious Dispositions and Internal Work

All 10 superintendents described leadership as inseparable from ongoing internal identity work. Across narratives, participants emphasized that their leadership was shaped by continuous reflection on values, positionality as White women, and the dispositions they sought to embody. All superintendents conveyed that equity-centered leadership required moral clarity and self-awareness, balancing care, relational trust, and high expectations rather than choosing between them. Identity consciousness thus functioned as a foundational leadership practice through which superintendents navigated authority, credibility, and equity-focused decision making.

Most superintendents (8 of 10) articulated a stance consistent with what participants often described as a “warm-demander” orientation, leadership that was relational, grounded in care, and unapologetically focused on high expectations and equity outcomes. Superintendent 3, Rebecca Dalton, captured this orientation succinctly:

I keep a few things front of mind. One is our motto: “Every scholar, every day—they deserve nothing less than our best.” Another is the belief that “if you build it, they will come.” I stay focused on the outcome, because it’s always about students.

Several superintendents (6 of 10) described being invigorated by challenge and intentionally drawn to complex, adaptive problems, framing leadership not as a position of authority but as a sustained commitment to remain engaged amid political volatility, emotional strain, and organizational uncertainty. Rather than invoking narratives of heroic individualism, participants emphasized grounded persistence, reflective endurance, and the capacity to stay present through discomfort. This orientation toward leadership reflected an understanding of equity-centered change as nonlinear and emotionally demanding work, requiring patience, self-regulation, and an ongoing willingness to learn. In this way, challenge was not experienced as a deterrent but as a generative condition through which leaders clarified purpose, deepened self-awareness, and reaffirmed their responsibility to the communities they served.

This internal identity work was neither abstract nor optional. It included grappling with imposter syndrome, navigating the pressure of being “the first” woman in key roles, and learning to “take up space” in positions historically reserved for men. More than half of the superintendents (6 of 10) explicitly named imposter syndrome as formative, particularly during early superintendent tenures or transitions into unfamiliar systems. First-generation college-going leaders and those who had navigated unfamiliar institutional cultures described how these experiences cultivated

empathy and heightened a sense of responsibility toward the communities they served. Across cases, knowing self, practicing reflexivity, and aligning actions with deeply held values were central to how superintendents defined effective leadership. These accounts suggest that identity-conscious dispositions were not ancillary to leadership practice; they formed the grounding from which purpose, vision, and meaning making emerged.

4.4.2.A2. Purpose, Vision, and Meaning Making

Building on this internal grounding, superintendents described anchoring their leadership in a long-term sense of purpose that provided direction amid conflict and uncertainty. Many superintendents (7 of 10) explicitly described this orientation as a North Star, emphasizing clarity about why they led and whom they served, particularly when decisions became contested or controversial. Diane Whitman (Superintendent 6) articulated this orientation clearly:

Be crystal clear on your North Star before you start—you'll need it. It has carried me through hard moments. People will be upset at times about what you say or do; keep returning to, "Is this in service of students?"

Purpose functioned not as a static statement or aspirational slogan but as an interpretive lens through which superintendents made sense of daily decisions, competing demands, and long-term priorities. A majority of superintendents (6 of 10) emphasized that urgency did not equate to rapid or symbolic action; rather, it required sustained alignment, coherence, and follow-through over time. Within this framing, urgency was understood as depth rather than speed; an insistence on doing the work carefully, relationally, and in ways that would endure beyond individual initiatives or leadership tenures. As Shannon Pierce (Superintendent 2) explained, urgency demanded disciplined focus and a willingness to resist performative responses in favor of purposeful, long-term change: "Rather than a quick 'reconciliation' resolution like other agencies, I asked the board to support a year-long community process to develop a district equity policy."

Across cases, all superintendents described emotional highs and lows, including moments of student success, public conflict, leadership turnover, and organizational crisis, as integral to leadership meaning making rather than as disruptions to be managed or avoided. Most superintendents (8 of 10) described learning to read these moments as data, interpreting them as indicators of system resistance, levels of relational trust, and the durability of their equity-oriented vision, rather than as isolated incidents or personal shortcomings. Over time, this interpretive shift allowed leaders to contextualize emotional intensity within broader patterns of change, reinforcing persistence rather than self-doubt.

As purpose became clearer, superintendents increasingly relied on relationships to interpret complexity, test assumptions, and calibrate decisions, drawing on trusted colleagues, mentors, and community partners. Meaning thus evolved from an individual cognitive process into a collective practice, grounded in dialogue and relational sense-making, which enabled leaders to sustain direction and coherence amid uncertainty.

4.4.3.A3. Relational Leadership, Mentorship, and Trust Building

Relational leadership emerged as the primary vehicle through which superintendents enacted their values and sustained purpose. Across all 10 cases, participants framed leadership as collective and described themselves as builders of programs and people rather than as individual change agents. Diane Whitman (Superintendent 6) reflected, “I loved building programs and people. I prioritize hiring people smarter than me, who add capacity and push back when needed; we get through hard things together.”

Most superintendents (9 of 10) described intentionally building racially, culturally, and professionally diverse leadership teams, emphasizing that the inclusion of multiple perspectives was foundational to equitable decision making rather than a matter of symbolic representation. Participants framed diversity as a functional necessity for identifying blind spots, disrupting dominant norms, and strengthening the quality and legitimacy of decisions. Trust-building practices, including consistent visibility, follow-through on commitments, deep listening, and action aligned with stated values, were described as ongoing forms of relational labor rather than discrete leadership moves.

Mentorship and sponsorship emerged as central components of this relational work and as formative influences on leadership identity. Seven superintendents named specific mentors who shaped their leadership trajectories through guidance, challenge, and affirmation. Notably, five of these seven participants explicitly identified cross-racial mentorship, often from women of color, as particularly identity-shaping, describing these relationships as critical sites for learning, accountability, and expanded perspective. As Melissa Quinn (Superintendent 10) reflected, “My mentor, a woman of color, has been the biggest influence on my path—pushing me toward roles I couldn’t yet see myself in and helping me work through impostor syndrome.”

These relationships extended beyond the provision of advice or technical guidance; they sharpened superintendents’ understanding of Whiteness, privilege, and the ethical responsibilities that accompany positional authority. Most superintendents (6 of 10) described a deliberate commitment to sponsoring other women, particularly women of color, a stance shaped by both the presence of affirming mentorship and their own experiences of exclusion, marginalization, or constrained access to informal networks of power. Sponsorship was distinguished from mentorship as an active practice of advocacy, visibility, and risk taking on behalf of others. As Susan Greer (Superintendent 9) reflected, these commitments were informed by gendered dynamics within leadership cultures: “Men sponsor each other easily. Women are often harder on each other. I’ve been cut down by women before. I believe our responsibility is to lift each other up—to sponsor, not just mentor.”

Through this lens, relational leadership functioned not only as a sustaining practice for individual superintendents but also as a strategic intervention aimed at reshaping leadership pathways. By linking identity consciousness with intentional sponsorship, participants positioned relational

leadership as a mechanism for collective capacity-building and for disrupting inequitable patterns of access and advancement within educational leadership.

4.4.4.A4. Nonlinear Pathways, Inquiry, and Leader Development

These identity-conscious, purpose-driven, and relational practices unfolded within career pathways that were rarely linear or predetermined. Addressing Research Question 1 directly, nine of the 10 superintendents reported that they did not initially aspire to the superintendency or envision themselves in the role early in their careers. Instead, leadership trajectories emerged through a confluence of opportunity, relational encouragement, and shifting organizational contexts. Participants described advancement as contingent on timing, trust, and the recognition of leadership capacity by others rather than on deliberate, upward career planning.

Three superintendents explicitly described being “tapped on the shoulder” by mentors or supervisors who named their leadership potential before they were able or willing to do so themselves. These moments of external affirmation functioned as critical inflection points, expanding participants’ sense of possibility and legitimizing pathways that had previously felt inaccessible or misaligned with their self-concept. As Laura McKenzie (Superintendent 7) reflected: “I did not set out to be a superintendent. People kept asking me to take on more. At some point, I realized I was already leading at that level, just without the title.”

Timing, district context, and family circumstances significantly shaped superintendents’ advancement decisions. Five participants accepted superintendent roles before feeling fully prepared for the scope and complexity of the position, often describing early tenure experiences marked by imposter syndrome, steep learning curves, and heightened self-doubt. These leaders framed their decisions as responses to opportunity windows, district need, or encouragement from mentors rather than a sense of readiness. In contrast, other superintendents described intentionally delaying advancement, prioritizing sustainability, family balance, or additional leadership development before assuming the role. These decisions reflected an awareness of the personal and professional costs of the superintendency and a desire to enter the position with greater stability and confidence.

An important outlier complicates this pattern. Susan Greer described feeling prepared for the superintendency yet being repeatedly passed over during the selection process. Reflecting on these experiences, she noted: “I kept getting to the finalist stage, and I knew I could do the job. It wasn’t about readiness anymore—it was about something else.”

Rather than interpreting these outcomes as personal shortcomings, Greer understood them as shaped by relational and contextual dynamics within hiring processes, including perceptions of fit and unspoken expectations about leadership presence. This outlier underscores a central tension in superintendent pathways: women may be encouraged to delay advancement until they feel “ready,” yet even when readiness is achieved, access to the role remains mediated by political, relational, and identity-based dynamics. These findings indicate that superintendent preparation and advancement do not necessarily follow linear or meritocratic pathways, but are mediated by

timing, context, and implicit standards of legitimacy that shape perceptions of leadership readiness.

Across these varied pathways, inquiry emerged as a central developmental stance that supported leadership growth over time. Most superintendents (6 of 10) explicitly described shifting from a performance-oriented mindset toward an inquiry-driven approach to leadership. Rather than seeking certainty or mastery, they described forming theories of action, testing strategies in real time, analyzing multiple data sources, and adjusting course in response to outcomes and feedback. This inquiry stance functioned as both a coping mechanism and a leadership strategy, enabling superintendents to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and public scrutiny while continuing to learn on the job.

Inquiry emerged as a central developmental stance across pathways. Superintendents (6 of 10) explicitly described adopting inquiry-oriented approaches, forming theories of action, testing strategies, analyzing data, and course-correcting over time. Colleen Myers (Superintendent 1) articulated this shift clearly, describing how adopting an inquiry-oriented approach allowed her to move beyond self-doubt and engage the superintendency as a learning process rather than a fixed measure of competence: “A pivotal moment . . . instilled an inquiry stance: form a hypothesis or theory of action, test, analyze data, adjust, and course-correct. It shaped both my teaching and my leadership.”

Insider–outsider positioning further shaped leadership development and sustainability across cases. Three superintendents entered districts as organizational outsiders and described encountering “closed-circle” community dynamics in which trust, legitimacy, and influence were historically reserved for those with longstanding relational ties. These leaders characterized early tenure as a period of heightened scrutiny, limited margin for error, and the need to earn credibility through visibility, consistency, and follow-through deliberately. Unlike insiders, whose legitimacy was often assumed, outsider superintendents described trust as provisional and contingent, requiring sustained relational labor over time.

These dynamics frequently intersected with layered identities that shaped belonging and authority. Ellen Foster (Superintendent 8) reflected on how outsider status was compounded not by her LGBTQIA+ identity itself, but by the absence of parenthood in a community where parenting functioned as a key marker of legitimacy. She explained: “I did not have kids, I was not in a heterosexual marriage . . . and I think not being a parent was almost a bigger deal than anything, because how could I really understand what students need?” Foster’s reflection illustrates how informal norms of belonging, rather than explicit bias, can serve as powerful gatekeeping mechanisms in superintendent leadership, shaping which perspectives are viewed as credible and which are questioned.

Across cases, layered identities, including age, first-generation college status, religion, LGBTQIA+ identity, interracial family structures, parenting children with disabilities or children of color, or not being a parent, shaped how superintendents interpreted harm, responsibility, and belonging within their districts. These identity dimensions influenced how leaders made sense of

conflict, navigated accountability, and determined when and how to take risks for equity. Leadership identity thus emerged as iterative rather than fixed, continually constructed through reflection, relationships, inquiry, and context across professional journeys.

Across the 10 case vignettes and the cross-case analysis of Finding A, leadership identity emerged as dynamic, relational, and continually under construction rather than fixed or fully formed at entry into the superintendency. Superintendents described becoming leaders through iterative cycles of reflection, action, feedback, and recalibration as they moved across roles, districts, and moments of uncertainty. Leadership identity was shaped not only by formal preparation but by lived experience, sponsorship, mentorship, and the necessity of making meaning amid complexity. Purpose-making and sponsorship functioned as stabilizing anchors within this process, with two superintendents explicitly naming a guiding North Star and three identifying sponsorship as pivotal to their advancement. Mentorship, particularly cross-racial mentorship, further deepened leaders' capacity to interrogate power, examine positionality, and clarify ethical responsibility.

These patterns established identity as the analytic foundation for understanding equity-centered superintendent leadership. Finding A demonstrates how White women superintendents learned to operate within authority, build credibility, and orient their leadership toward equity over time, even as they navigated gendered expectations and the often-unexamined norms of Whiteness embedded in educational systems. Leadership identity, as revealed in this chapter, functioned as both a lens for interpreting context and a resource for action. This identity-conscious foundation sets the stage for Chapter 5, which moves from how leadership identities are formed to how they are enacted, tested, and sustained within the emotional, political, and racialized realities of the superintendency.

Chapter 5

Collaborative Leadership, Isolation, and Layered Identities

Chapter 5 presents Findings B, *Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: The Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency*, and C, *Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, Access, and Risk*. Together, these findings show how White women superintendents navigated the emotional, relational, and political dimensions of the role, while also revealing how gender and Whiteness shaped their access to leadership opportunities, perceptions of legitimacy, and the ways they enacted equity-centered leadership in practice. Chapter 4 focused on how leadership identity was constructed over time through purpose, reflection, relationships, and nonlinear professional pathways, and Chapter 5 shifts attention to the conditions under which equity leadership is enacted, constrained, and sustained within complex PK–12 systems.

Finding B, *Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: The Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency*, and Finding C, *Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities*:

Gender, Race, Access, and Risk, together examine how superintendents navigated the moral and emotional demands of equity-centered leadership. This includes the sustained costs of visibility, conflict, and decision making under public scrutiny. These findings also explore how leaders managed resistance, governance dynamics, and institutional constraints while working to align their values with practice. Chapter 5 further traces how participants' understanding of Whiteness evolved over time, shifting from implicit awareness to a more explicit recognition of Whiteness as a systemic force shaping policy, norms, and outcomes within their districts.

Together, Findings B and C address Research Questions 2, 3, and 4 by analyzing how White women superintendents made sense of and responded to the intersecting dynamics of privilege and marginalization. They also examine how these leaders leveraged their positional authority to disrupt inequitable structures while confronting the limitations of their influence within systems historically shaped by racialized and gendered power. As illustrated in Table 5.1, the coding matrix for Findings B and C captures the multi-layered nature of this work, including the emotional weight of the superintendency, the moral imperative and burden of equity leadership, the navigation of power and political contexts, and the intentional development of collective capacity. It also highlights how gendered expectations, Whiteness and access, systemic barriers, and intersecting identities shaped both how leaders enacted equity work and how their leadership was experienced by others. This chapter positions equity leadership not as a static set of practices, but as an ongoing, contested process requiring continual reflection, adaptation, and accountability.

Table 5.1

Emergent Finding B and C Coding Matrix

Finding	Subfinding	Description	Codes	Total Freq. (n)
B. Leading Alone	B1. Emotional Weight of the Superintendency	Superintendents manage heavy emotional strain, requiring resilience amid public pressure and family demands.	Emotional Terrain; Resilience; Advocacy; Glass Cliff; Burn Out; Family; Everything for Everyone	79
	B2. Moral Imperative & Burden of Equity Leadership	Leaders carry a deep equity commitment, often internalizing the work and navigating resistance.	Mine to Do; Impact; Pushback; Change Mgmt	73
	B3. Navigating Power, Politics & Structural Realities	Superintendents operate within complex political and structural realities requiring strategy and judgment.	Politics; Stakeholders; Staffing; Resources; Boards; Pipeline; Insider/Outsider	111

Table 5.1 continued.

Finding	Subfinding	Description	Codes	Total Freq. (n)
	B4. Building Collective Capacity & Shared Responsibility	Leaders build shared ownership for equity by developing co-conspirators and collective capacity.	Co-Conspiratorship; Mentorship; Sponsorship	13
B. Leading Alone	B5. Maintaining Trust & Long-Term Direction	Superintendents sustain trust while holding clear direction across diverse communities.	Stakeholder Perception; North Star	69
C. Layers of Power	C1. Gendered Expectations	Women leaders face tone policing, credibility gaps, and gendered biases in how their leadership is received.	Gendered Expectations	43
	C2. Whiteness & Access	Whiteness can provide access or create vulnerability, shaping leadership experiences and decision-making.	Whiteness; Privilege	36
	C3. Intentionality	Leaders act with intentionality—disrupting racialized systems and aligning actions with equity goals.	Transformational Practice	11
	C4. Barriers & Gatekeeping	Women leaders face barriers such as gatekeeping, the glass cliff, and uneven hiring practices.	Barriers: Glass Cliff	36
	C5. Layered identities shape equity work	Layered identities shape how leaders approach equity and how systems respond to them.	Intersections; identity	8

5.1. Finding B: Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: The Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency

Finding B illuminates the emotional, political, and structural dimensions of superintendents' work, highlighting both the loneliness of the superintendent role and the necessity of building collective responsibility to sustain equity-centered leadership. Sub findings B1, Emotional Weight and Loneliness of the Superintendency; B2, Moral Imperative and the Burden of Equity Leadership; B3, Navigating Power, Politics, and Structural Realities; B4, Building Collective Capacity and Co-Conspiratorship; and B5, Building and Maintaining Relational Trust and Long-Term Direction demonstrate how emotional labor, moral commitment, political navigation, and relational work shaped leadership for equity White women superintendents. These subfindings address Research Question 3 by examining the challenges and opportunities superintendents encountered while leading equity-centered transformation and overlap with Research Question 2 by revealing how gendered and racialized dynamics shaped leadership experience and sustainability.

Finding B demonstrates that sustaining equity-centered change required more than individual resilience or commitment; it depended on identity-conscious leadership and the deliberate construction of relational and structural supports. Across cases, superintendents' efforts to lead for equity were shaped by their understandings of and navigation of gender, Whiteness, and positional authority within their systems. These leaders did not rely solely on personal resolve to withstand resistance or isolation, but intentionally cultivated relationships, diverse leadership teams, and organizational structures that distributed responsibility and reinforced equity-oriented norms. This finding foregrounds the importance of relational trust and structural coherence as conditions for sustaining equity-centered leadership and frames the analysis that follows.

5.1.1.B1. Emotional Weight and Loneliness of the Superintendency

All 10 superintendents portrayed the role as intensely emotional and often profoundly lonely. Each described feeling positioned as the emotional container for the district, absorbing community fear, conflict, grief, and urgency while simultaneously being expected to project steadiness, confidence, and clarity. This emotional labor extended beyond professional responsibilities; many participants also described carrying the emotional coordination of their households, navigating caregiving, partnership, or family responsibilities alongside the unrelenting demands of the superintendency. The cumulative effect was a sense of isolation unique to the role, intensified by positional authority and confidentiality constraints that limited where and with whom superintendents could process their experiences. As Diane Whitman (Superintendent 6) noted: "Some male mentors didn't fully understand the dual demands of caregiving and leading. Even now, I carry a lot of the household mental load. That expectation to be 'everything for everyone' is real and challenging."

In this framing, emotional labor was not episodic; it was structural, rooted in the daily work of holding multiple audiences, multiple crises, and multiple competing demands. All superintendents frequently described the superintendency as a lifestyle rather than a job, with blurred boundaries

that intensified during crises, public controversy, or board instability. All emphasized that key aspects of the work could not be shared within the organization due to confidentiality, positional distance, or political risk, which deepened isolation. Meredith Granada (Superintendent 4) described the emotional toll with striking clarity: “I almost quit. . . . It was mid-November, and I was crying . . . I think the superintendency is fundamentally lonely.”

All superintendents described building personal and professional supports that enabled them to remain “well enough to lead.” Superintendents cited therapy, coaching, spiritual practices, peer networks among superintendents, and family supports as protective infrastructure. Several (6 of 10) described concrete boundary strategies designed to preserve presence and sustainability. Laura McKenzie (Superintendent 7) explained,

I set hard limits: when I get home around 6:30, I put my phone on a charger in the bedroom and try to be present for family. Another tactic: I bring my laptop home but not the charger, so I have to be prudent about what I do in the evening or weekend.

Across all cases, loneliness surfaced as more than an individual emotional experience. It reflected the structural design of the superintendent role and the gendered expectations placed on women leaders to be emotionally available, steady, and endlessly capable. All superintendents described being expected to simultaneously absorb uncertainty and conflict without visible strain, offer reassurance without defensiveness, and make high-stakes decisions while maintaining relational warmth. These expectations narrowed the space for vulnerability and constrained opportunities for authentic emotional processing, particularly given the power asymmetries and confidentiality demands embedded in the role. As a result, loneliness functioned not as a personal shortcoming, but as an occupational condition shaped by institutional structures and gendered norms that positioned women superintendents as both emotional anchors and insulated decision makers within their systems.

All superintendents described holding formal authority within systems historically shaped by Whiteness while simultaneously experiencing pressure to remain calm, measured, and unwavering in public settings. Across cases, participants noted that displays of uncertainty, emotion, or vulnerability were perceived as risks to legitimacy in politically charged environments where their authority was already contested or conditional. This tension was particularly acute in moments of equity-focused decision making, when resistance was often framed as concern about process, tone, or fit, rather than substance. As a result, much of the emotional labor associated with equity leadership was carried privately, even as superintendents were expected to present strategic clarity, emotional steadiness, and composure in public-facing roles. This pattern functioned as a protective strategy but also intensified isolation, reinforcing the divide between the public performance of leadership and the private experience of navigating resistance, doubt, and moral weight.

5.1.2.B2. Moral Imperative and the Burden of Equity Leadership

Despite the emotional cost of the work, superintendents consistently described equity leadership as nonnegotiable and deeply personal. Across all cases, participants framed equity not as a discrete initiative or strategic priority that could be advanced incrementally, but as a moral and ethical obligation embedded in their leadership identity. This orientation shaped how superintendents interpreted conflict, pressure, and critique. Rather than viewing resistance as a signal to retreat or recalibrate values, leaders described being more willing to endure public criticism, political backlash, and professional risk when they believed their decisions were aligned with their purpose and in service of students who had been historically marginalized. As Shannon Pierce (Superintendent 2) captured, “At some point, I realized I could not wait for someone else to name what needed to change.” This moral framing functioned as both a source of resolve and a stabilizing compass, allowing superintendents to hold steady in the face of opposition.

At the same time, several superintendents (6 of 10) described internalizing responsibility for inequitable systems and engaging in ongoing self-questioning about the legitimacy and potential for harm of their roles as White women leaders. This reflection surfaced as tension rather than certainty; an awareness that positional authority and Whiteness could both enable access and reproduce harm if left unexamined. These leaders described carrying a heightened sense of accountability for how equity decisions were made, whose voices were centered, and whether their actions aligned with stated commitments. Colleen Myers (Superintendent 1) reflected,

I’ve questioned whether I should be in the seat, whether I’m taking a spot that could go to a leader of color, and how to ensure I’m self-aware, checking assumptions, and not causing harm. . . . Leading in [Urban district] as a White woman has pushed me to be more thoughtful.

These narratives reveal that equity leadership required not only outward action but sustained inward scrutiny. For several superintendents, this included a persistent concern that their leadership might inadvertently perpetuate harm, even when their intentions were grounded in justice and care for students. These superintendents described engaging in ongoing self-interrogation about how their positional authority, decision-making processes, and use of voice could reinforce existing power dynamics or marginalize perspectives they sought to elevate. This reflexive stance was not framed as hesitation or indecision, but as an ethical discipline, one that demanded continual examination of impact alongside intent. In this way, inward scrutiny functioned as a defining dimension of equity-centered leadership, shaping how superintendents approached responsibility, accountability, and the moral weight of their role.

Superintendents consistently described encountering resistance when equity work challenged entrenched privilege, particularly when efforts explicitly named race, reallocated resources, or disrupted longstanding practices and norms. Across all cases, resistance rarely appeared as overt opposition to equity itself; instead, it was frequently framed as concern about process, tone, or political appropriateness. Participants described accusations that equity initiatives were “too

political,” “divisive,” or beyond the appropriate scope of educational leadership, even when the work was grounded in district data and student outcomes. Rebecca Dalton (Superintendent 3) characterized some of her lowest points as moments of “resistance to change . . . pushback beyond healthy debate,” noting that this opposition often came from men in positions of authority.

Over time, distinguishing between generative critique and resistance rooted in the protection of privilege emerged as a learned leadership skill. Superintendents described the need to assess whether feedback reflected good-faith concern about implementation or functioned to stall, dilute, or redirect equity efforts. Navigating this terrain required strategic judgment and emotional regulation, as leaders calibrated when to slow the work to build understanding, when to persist despite discomfort, when to broaden engagement to redistribute ownership, and when to reframe initiatives to sustain momentum without compromising core commitments. Equity leadership thus demanded not only moral conviction but also political discernment, particularly in contexts where superintendents’ credibility, motives, and legitimacy were actively contested.

5.1.3.B3. Navigating Power, Politics, and Structural Realities

Superintendents consistently described the superintendency as “half instruction, half politics,” emphasizing that equity leadership required political literacy alongside instructional expertise. Across all cases, participants detailed the complexity of working within highly visible and contested political arenas, including navigating relationships with elected boards, negotiating with unions, responding to organized parent and community groups, and managing public narratives amplified through media and social platforms. These political dynamics shaped not only the feasibility of equity initiatives but also their scope, pace, and sustainability, often determining whether leaders could move beyond equity-oriented language toward durable structural change. Participants noted that without political fluency, particularly an understanding of power, timing, and stakeholder alignment, equity efforts were vulnerable to dilution, delay, or reversal.

Gender and Whiteness further shaped how superintendents navigated these political landscapes. Participants described heightened scrutiny of decision making, communication style, and emotional expression, with women leaders experiencing more frequent testing of credibility and intent. Linda Harper (Superintendent 5) described how gendered scrutiny intensified surveillance and legitimacy checks, noting:

As for barriers, gender was the biggest. I was the first female superintendent and first female high school principal in the district, and I felt constantly watched and evaluated. . . . The question was always, “Can she . . . ?” That constant scrutiny took a toll.

Such accounts reveal that the political environment of districts encompasses not only policy debates, governance processes, and stakeholder conflict, but also the gendered evaluation of legitimacy itself. Across cases, superintendents described being assessed not solely on the substance of their decisions, but on how closely their leadership comported with implicit expectations about demeanor, visibility, and authority. These gendered evaluations shaped how

political conflict was experienced and interpreted, often intensifying scrutiny of women leaders' tone, relational style, and perceived alignment with community norms.

Board relations emerged as particularly consequential within this landscape. Some superintendents (6 of 10) described boards that enabled courageous equity leadership by establishing clear governance roles, demonstrating trust, and publicly supporting difficult equity-focused decisions. In contrast, others described more subtle forms of undermining, including role confusion, shifting expectations, and informal communication patterns that reinforced gendered assumptions about authority and accountability. For these leaders, board dynamics functioned as a key determinant of whether equity work could advance or became constrained by political friction and legitimacy testing. Laura McKenzie (Superintendent 7) shared "In my first superintendency, the predecessor became county superintendent. Some board members continued to treat him as my supervisor, which reflected gendered assumptions and a misunderstanding of governance structure."

This dynamic shaped not only superintendents' daily decision making, but also their capacity to sustain a coherent long-term direction without being destabilized by informal power structures. For at least six participants, informal influence, exercised through personal relationships, historical norms, or behind-the-scenes communication, created conditions in which authority could be subtly challenged or redirected outside formal governance channels. Navigating this terrain required constant political calibration, as superintendents worked to maintain momentum on equity priorities while guarding against erosion of trust or legitimacy through unofficial pathways of power.

Insider–outsider positioning further shaped political navigation and the construction of trust. In districts with deep generational roots, belonging emerged as a significant factor in perceived legitimacy, particularly for leaders entering from outside the community. Several superintendents (6 of 10) described how historical ties, long-standing family presence, and local networks produced closed-circle dynamics that required sustained relational labor to penetrate. Susan Greer (Superintendent 9) captured this challenge, noting, "Many families have been here for generations. That creates a closed-circle dynamic. I was an outsider," adding that new women leaders often had to work "much harder and longer" to establish credibility and trust.

Across all cases, contextual constraints such as limited resources, staffing shortages, funding volatility, and uneven leadership pipelines further shaped leadership practice. These conditions intensified the operational and emotional demands of the role, particularly in smaller or under-resourced districts where superintendents carried multiple functional responsibilities. Melissa Quinn (Superintendent 10) described the cumulative operational weight of leading in a small district: "There simply weren't enough people to do all the work. I was doing everything: writing the LCAP, presenting budgets, handling custodial schedules, ordering supplies, leading instruction."

These accounts position district capacity and role design as critical equity conditions that shape and constrain what transformational leadership can realistically look like in practice.

Superintendents' ability to advance equity was not determined solely by vision, skill, or commitment, but by the structural realities of their districts, including staffing capacity, resource stability, governance coherence, and the scope of responsibilities concentrated in the superintendent role. When leadership roles were overextended or organizational systems underdeveloped, equity work became more vulnerable to fragmentation, delay, or reliance on individual heroics. Conversely, districts with clearer role design and sufficient capacity created conditions in which equity-centered change could be pursued more strategically and sustainably. These findings suggested that transformational leadership is not an individual trait enacted in isolation, but a function of organizational design that either enables or constrains equity-centered action.

5.1.4.B4. Building Collective Capacity and Co-Conspiratorship

Although Finding B underscores the isolating nature of the superintendency, many participants emphasized that sustaining equity-centered change required intentionally moving away from solitary leadership toward collaborative approaches. For more than half of the superintendents (6 of 10), collaborative leadership was described not only as a practical response to isolation but as a necessary condition for sustaining equity work over time. Building collective capacity emerged as both a strategy for organizational sustainability and an enactment of transformational equity leadership, shifting responsibility for change from the individual leader to the system itself.

Participants described deliberately cultivating leadership cultures grounded in trust, openness, and shared problem solving rather than competition or positional authority. Central to this work was explicit attention to who was invited into leadership spaces, whose expertise was recognized, and how decision-making power was distributed. By broadening participation and elevating diverse forms of knowledge, superintendents sought to disrupt hierarchical norms that often marginalize voices closest to inequitable conditions. Diane Whitman (Superintendent 6) described intentionally designing leadership pathways that expanded who leads and strengthened support for emerging leaders: "I'm intentional about broadening who leads—so students see leaders who look and sound like them—and about building support systems so new leaders can succeed. . . . Our culture emphasizes authenticity and mutual support over competition." This emphasis reflects a shift away from individualistic leadership models toward structures that distribute responsibility and foster leadership development.

Superintendents described trusted cabinet members, external coaches, and superintendent peers as co-conspirators, people with whom they could pressure test ideas, name fear, and think strategically (6 of 10). Colleen Myers (Superintendent 1) reflected:

At times, I questioned whether it was my place to make a bold move. . . . That's why a diverse team and strong culture are essential. I "pressure test" ideas broadly and rely on distributed leadership so colleagues feel safe pushing back.

These relationships did not eliminate the inherent isolation of the superintendency, but they functioned as critical buffers against burnout by redistributing intellectual, emotional, and political

labor. For most superintendents (6 of 10), collaborative structures and trusted relationships provided spaces to think through complex equity dilemmas, process emotional strain, and anticipate political consequences without bearing the full weight of decision making alone. By sharing sensemaking, strategy, and responsibility across leadership teams, superintendents were able to sustain clarity of purpose while reducing the personal toll of equity work. In this way, relational support operated not as a substitute for authority, but as a stabilizing infrastructure that made sustained, equity-centered leadership more possible over time.

5.1.5.B5. Building and Maintaining Relational Trust and Long-Term

Direction

More than half of the superintendents (6 of 10) described trust as fragile, dynamic, and continually negotiated rather than assumed or static. For nine participants, trust was shaped by stakeholders' often competing expectations about what success should look like, how quickly change should occur, and whose needs should be prioritized. In this context, trust building was described as an ongoing leadership practice rather than a one-time achievement. Leaders emphasized the importance of visibility, consistent and transparent communication, and follow-through on commitments as essential mechanisms for sustaining credibility over time. Rebecca Dalton (Superintendent 3) captured this orientation, stating, "I hold the outcome clearly in mind. It's always about students."

All superintendents further described intentionally acknowledging missteps, explaining the rationale behind difficult decisions, and listening carefully to critique, particularly from those most directly impacted by inequitable conditions. This stance was framed as both relational and ethical, signaling respect, accountability, and openness to learning. At the same time, superintendents recognized that equity-centered decisions, especially those involving the redistribution of resources or the explicit naming of race, could strain trust with some stakeholders, even as they strengthened trust with others. These tensions were often experienced as fluid and unpredictable, with support shifting as decisions moved from principle to implementation. Ellen Foster (Superintendent 8) described how rapidly shifting political and relational dynamics could become unmanageable:

Sometimes multiple things collide at once. . . . I never fully felt that [District] and I shared the same values. . . . When that situation hit, it became insurmountable. It spiraled, and I'm not sure a different leader would have had a different experience."

This account illustrates how quickly relational trust can be destabilized during moments of political volatility and perceived mismatches in values, particularly when equity commitments collide with competing stakeholder priorities or shifting power dynamics. Superintendents (9 of 10) described how trust, once strained, could erode rapidly in the absence of shared understanding, clear governance roles, or aligned expectations.

Maintaining long-term direction in this context required a willingness to tolerate short-term conflict while continuing to invest in relational infrastructure capable of holding difficult conversations over time. For most superintendents (9 of 10), this meant proactively creating structures that supported sustained dialogue, shared sensemaking, and policy alignment rather than relying on episodic communication or crisis response. Leaders emphasized that relational work was not ancillary to equity leadership but foundational to its durability, enabling districts to revisit tensions without abandoning core commitments. Shannon Pierce (Superintendent 2) described this approach in her efforts to build a center for Black student excellence grounded in early partnership, shared vision, and policy alignment:

The center grew out of early community work in my 1st year—naming the system’s failures to serve Black students and being transparent about the data. . . . We convened a community–staff team, largely composed of people of color, to co-design our Excellence and Equity board policy. That policy became the foundation for the center.

Superintendents’ accounts indicate that trust functioned not only as a condition for implementing equity-centered change, but also as an emotional and political stabilizer that enabled leaders to remain engaged rather than depleted. For all superintendents, trust provided a relational buffer that absorbed some of the volatility inherent in equity leadership, reducing the sense of constant vigilance and personal exposure. When trust was present, leaders described greater capacity to stay oriented toward long-term goals, to weather criticism without becoming immobilized, and to engage conflict as part of the work rather than as a threat to legitimacy. In this way, trust operated as both an enabling mechanism for change and a sustaining force that mitigated burnout and supported persistence in equity leadership over time.

Finding B demonstrates that equity leadership in the superintendency was shaped by intense emotional labor, isolation, political negotiation, and persistent structural constraints. All superintendents carried the weight of community expectations while mediating conflict and absorbing the emotions of students, staff, and families, often with limited organizational infrastructure. This work was described as deeply meaningful and morally anchored, yet also profoundly lonely, reflecting both the role’s design and the gendered expectations placed on women leaders. Even amid these conditions, superintendents described sustaining themselves through deliberate investments in relational and structural supports, building strong and diverse teams, cultivating co-conspirators, and relying on trusted colleagues, mentors, peers, and family for honest feedback and emotional grounding. Moral purpose operated as a stabilizing anchor, enabling leaders to persist in equity-centered work in the face of political volatility and operational demands that continually tested their resolve.

Finding B lays the groundwork for Finding C, *Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, Access, and Risk*, by demonstrating that the emotional and political demands of the superintendency were not experienced within a neutral leadership terrain. Instead, these demands were filtered through intersecting systems of power, including gendered expectations and the often unmarked norms of Whiteness. Building on this foundation, Finding C turns explicitly to the ways race, gender, and layered identities shaped superintendents’ experiences of

legitimacy, risk, and equity practice as they led within systems structured by both patriarchal and racialized power.

5.2. Finding C: Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, Access, and Risk

Finding C examines how superintendents understood and navigated their racialized and gendered positions within PK–12 systems, and how these identities shaped both their career trajectories and their day-to-day leadership practice. The subfindings illuminate the ways women leaders were evaluated, constrained, and scrutinized through gendered expectations of authority, demeanor, and competence; how Whiteness functioned simultaneously as a source of institutional access and as an ethical responsibility requiring ongoing reflection and restraint; and how superintendents translated growing identity consciousness into intentional, equity-centered leadership practice. This finding also highlights how structural barriers, gatekeeping, and informal networks shaped entry into the superintendency, and how additional identity dimensions, including sexuality, parental status, class, background, and outsider status, further influenced belonging, legitimacy, and leaders' recognition of potential harm. Together, Finding C addresses Research Questions 1, 2, and 4 by clarifying how gender and Whiteness structured access, legitimacy, risk, and equity practice across superintendents' leadership pathways and professional lives.

5.2.1.C1. Gendered Expectations and Tone Policing

Across all superintendents' accounts, gendered expectations emerged as a persistent and often invisible force shaping how leadership was interpreted, evaluated, and constrained. For nine participants, scrutiny of tone, emotional expression, and demeanor surfaced as a recurring feature of their leadership experience, revealing contradictory and often unattainable expectations for women in positions of authority. All superintendents described pressure to be simultaneously firm and agreeable, direct yet nurturing, decisive without appearing threatening, and confident without being perceived as arrogant.

These gendered double-binds required constant self-monitoring and strategic calibration, shaping not only how leaders communicated publicly but also how they made sense of their own legitimacy and authority. Participants described expending significant emotional and cognitive energy anticipating how actions and words might be interpreted through a gendered lens, often adjusting leadership moves to avoid backlash while attempting to remain aligned with their values. Shannon Dalton (Superintendent 3) described noticing differential interpretations of authority and the subtle ways power operates in gendered workplaces:

It's literally about experiences supervising some men, not all, where I can see the perception is different, or their tone with me can be disrespectful. And I wonder if they would have that tone if I were a male . . . questioning or undermining.

Others described being explicitly advised to soften their tone or cautioned that they would be perceived as “too direct,” even when communicating factual information or fulfilling core responsibilities of the role. For nine superintendents, such feedback was experienced as gendered rather than performance based, reinforcing the expectation that women leaders manage others’ emotional comfort alongside institutional decision making. These superintendents noted that similar communication styles were often interpreted as clarity or decisiveness when enacted by men, while being read as abrasive or inappropriate when enacted by women. Linda Harper (Superintendent 5) described how this gendered scrutiny extended beyond professional actions into assessments of her personal legitimacy and right to lead: “When I became superintendent . . . my appearance, my sensitivity, my parenting, my decision making—everything was commented on.”

Assumptions about age and experience further intensified these gendered dynamics for younger superintendents, some of whom entered districts under conditions resembling a glass cliff. For at least four participants, youth was read as inexperience, amplifying scrutiny of decision making and increasing the pressure to prove competence quickly in already unstable or high-risk contexts. These leaders described navigating compounded expectations related to gender and age, often finding that credibility had to be continually earned rather than presumed. Diane Whitman (Superintendent 6) described how she became attuned to how she was read in superintendent spaces and how she strategically chose where to invest her leadership energy: “In rooms with other superintendents, I’ve been dismissed at times—usually because of assumptions about my age or experience. . . . I’m more intentional now about which rooms I choose to enter.”

Across narratives, gendered expectations shaped both the volume and type of labor required for women superintendents to establish credibility, as well as the emotional cost of maintaining legitimacy over time. For nine superintendents, credibility was not assumed through positional authority alone but had to be continually demonstrated through heightened visibility, relational work, and careful management of tone and demeanor. This ongoing legitimacy work demanded sustained emotional regulation and self-surveillance, contributing to fatigue and compounding the isolating nature of the role. As a result, gendered expectations functioned not only as external constraints on leadership practice but also as internalized pressures that shaped how superintendents experienced authority, risk, and persistence in equity-centered leadership.

5.2.2.C2. Whiteness, Access, and Risk

All superintendents described Whiteness as a powerful and often initially invisible force shaping both their leadership trajectories and their capacity to lead for equity. Across all stories, superintendents acknowledged that Whiteness conferred institutional legitimacy, ease of access, and a baseline of comfort within systems historically organized around White norms, particularly in White-dominant contexts. This racial positioning often facilitated entry into leadership spaces, smoothed interactions with boards and community stakeholders, and reduced the need to prove belonging or competence. At the same time, participants emphasized that Whiteness required

intentional interrogation, as unexamined privilege risked reproducing harm even when equity intentions were sincere. Melissa Quinn (Superintendent 10) articulated this shift:

As for Whiteness—doors have opened for me throughout my career . . . because I’m White. I didn’t recognize it at first . . . I move through systems built for me. I don’t have to code-switch or prove I belong. That’s privilege.

Others described leadership in racially diverse systems as prompting ongoing identity journeys (10 of 10). Shannon Pierce (Superintendent 2) stated, “I’m on an ongoing identity journey. . . . I need to understand my Whiteness and how to leverage my positional privilege in service of students of color.”

Several superintendents (6 of 10) described early equity efforts that still centered on White comfort or relied on generic language about “all students” rather than naming race and structural power. Naming Whiteness explicitly became a marker of accountability and a shift in leadership practice. Pierce (Superintendent 2) emphasized disciplined self-positioning: “Listen widely, study Whiteness without centering yourself . . . discern ‘what is mine to do’ in each context.”

Whiteness emerged simultaneously as a source of access and as a site of risk in equity leadership. All superintendents described how Whiteness may have facilitated entry into leadership networks, conferred baseline credibility, and created a sense of institutional comfort that smoothed navigation of political and organizational spaces. At the same time, superintendents emphasized that when left unexamined, this privilege carried significant risk, including the inadvertent reproduction of harm and the recentralization of White perspectives within equity initiatives intended to disrupt racial inequities. Leaders described the necessity of holding this tension consciously, recognizing that the same positional advantages that enabled influence and authority could undermine equity goals if not paired with ongoing reflexivity, accountability, and restraint.

5.2.3.C3. Intentionality and Transformational Practice

Most superintendents (7 of 10) described acting with deliberate intent to challenge racialized norms and redesign inequitable systems rather than relying on symbolic commitments to equity. They described this intentionality as expressed through concrete structural actions, including restructuring programs, reallocating resources, revising discipline and placement practices, and rewriting mission and vision statements so that equity commitments functioned as accountability anchors rather than aspirational abstractions. Leaders emphasized that without embedding equity into formal policies, practices, and guiding documents, commitments remained vulnerable to reinterpretation or retreat under pressure.

Linda Harper (Superintendent 5) captured this tension succinctly when she asked, “If we say ‘all,’ do we mean all? Because if we really mean middle-class White students, we should say that instead.” Participants described such moments of explicit naming as critical turning points, creating shared language that clarified intent and exposed implicit exclusions. Once articulated,

this language could be referenced during moments of conflict or resistance, enabling leaders and stakeholders to hold the system accountable to its stated values. In this way, identity-conscious leadership was translated into durable equity practice through the deliberate alignment of language, structure, and accountability.

Superintendents also described quieter, less visible forms of disruption that operated within the everyday routines of district leadership. For seven superintendents, equity work was advanced by embedding equity-focused questions into regular reporting and decision-making processes, prompting parent and community groups to examine participation, representation, and access, and advocating for inclusive design across instructional practices, staffing structures, and organizational systems. These approaches were described as intentional strategies for normalizing equity as a standing expectation rather than an episodic initiative, ensuring that questions of impact and access were continually surfaced even in the absence of overt conflict. Laura McKenzie (Superintendent 7) described this identity-conscious practice as a discipline—one that required sustained attention, consistency, and restraint: “Dig into deeper understandings of inequity. Do anti-bias work. . . . Do not assume—build relationships with people in marginalized groups who can be honest with you . . . commit to making it better for everyone.”

These accounts illustrate how superintendents translated identity-conscious reflection into deliberate, strategic practice, aligning their positional authority with their stated equity commitments. For seven superintendents, increased awareness of how race, gender, and power operated within their leadership roles informed not only what they sought to change, but how they exercised authority, allocated attention, and structured decision-making processes. Rather than treating identity reflection as a private or abstract exercise, leaders described using it as a guide for action, shaping policy choices, communication strategies, and organizational design in ways intended to disrupt inequitable norms and redistribute opportunity. In this way, identity-conscious leadership functioned as a bridge between internal reflection and systemic change, grounding equity commitments in everyday leadership practice.

5.2.4.C4. Barriers, Gatekeeping, and Glass Cliffs (9 of 10 Superintendents)

Although Whiteness often provided baseline access to leadership spaces, superintendents described persistent gendered barriers and gatekeeping dynamics that shaped who was selected for the superintendency and under what conditions. For nine superintendents, hiring processes were experienced as opaque and uneven, frequently mediated through informal networks that advantaged men and reinforced narrow, gendered constructions of superintendent readiness. Leaders described expectations that privileged particular career pathways, leadership styles, and performances of confidence that aligned with masculine norms of authority.

A few superintendents (3 of 10) recounted repeated experiences of advancing to finalist stages only to be passed over, only to later learn that board decisions hinged on subjective assessments of fit, likability, or perceived community comfort rather than demonstrated competence or instructional expertise. These judgments were often described as rapid and difficult to contest,

leaving candidates to infer how gendered expectations shaped selection outcomes. Over time, some superintendents described learning to strategically recalibrate how they presented themselves in interviews and public settings to navigate these dynamics without compromising their core values. Susan Greer (Superintendent 9) described this process of adjustment and sensemaking: “I learned that in short interviews, boards need to like you quickly. As a woman, I had spent too much time proving competence rather than showing who I was.”

Some superintendents (4 of 10) also described glass-cliff conditions, stepping into precarious contexts with limited margin for error and high public visibility. Laura McKenzie (Superintendent 7) described inheriting significant fiscal instability and being publicly associated with deficits she did not create: “Even though I hadn’t created the deficit, my name was attached to the problem. . . It was extremely challenging—ethically, emotionally, and professionally.”

These narratives demonstrated that entry into the superintendency was shaped by racialized and gendered logics of credibility, opportunity, and risk rather than by merit alone. For nine superintendents, advancement depended not only on experience or preparation, but on how their leadership was read through intersecting assumptions about race, gender, and authority. Although Whiteness often facilitated access to leadership pathways and produced baseline assumptions of readiness or fit, gender significantly narrowed the margin for error. Women leaders described heightened scrutiny of communication, decision making, and demeanor, as well as increased vulnerability to being deemed unsuitable in moments of uncertainty or conflict. Together, these dynamics shaped not only who was selected for the role, but also the conditions under which superintendents were expected to succeed once appointed.

5.2.5.C5. Layered Identities Shaping Equity Work (6 of 10 Superintendents)

Although all superintendents identified as White women, superintendents emphasized that their leadership experiences could not be fully understood through race and gender alone. For at least six superintendents, additional dimensions of identity, including immigration history, first-generation status, Jewish identity, LGBTQIA+ identity, interracial family structure, parenting across disability or race, or not being a parent, significantly shaped both how they interpreted educational systems and how those systems interpreted them. These layered identities influenced leaders’ sensemaking about belonging, vulnerability, and responsibility, as well as how legitimacy was granted, withheld, or contested in different contexts.

Susan Greer (Superintendent 9), a first-generation American who began school as an English learner, described how her immigrant background deepened empathy for multilingual students while also acknowledging the protective role of Whiteness in her family’s experience. “I started school as an English learner, which shaped my empathy for multilingual students,” she explained, while noting that her family “didn’t experience racism or discrimination . . . because we were immigrants,” explicitly identifying Whiteness as a buffer against racialized harm. This reflection illustrates how multiple identity dimensions operated simultaneously, shaping both awareness

and access. Similarly, Ellen Foster (Superintendent 8) described how sexuality and outsider status shaped perceptions of legitimacy and belonging within her district context: “I didn’t live in the district and was perceived as an outsider. I’m a lesbian, which likely added another layer of bias. . . . I’m not a ‘pancake-breakfast’ or ‘Friday-night-lights’ type of leader.”

For many superintendents (6 of 10), layered identities served as interpretive lenses that shaped recognition of harm, belonging, and responsibility. They often deepened empathy and sharpened analysis of exclusion, while not negating racial privilege. Superintendents were explicit that Whiteness continued to confer institutional legitimacy and access even as other identities produced marginalization or dislocation. This paradox required continual ethical attention to how privilege operated alongside gendered and identity-based constraints.

Finding C demonstrates that White women superintendents led from a dual positionality shaped by both access and constraint. Gendered expectations regulated how authority could be expressed and interpreted, whereas Whiteness often conferred legitimacy and ease of institutional access. All superintendents described developing increasing awareness of Whiteness as systemic power and grappling with the responsibility to leverage positional privilege without centering White comfort. At the same time, leaders faced barriers, gatekeeping, and glass-cliff conditions that intensified scrutiny and narrowed margins for error. Layered identities further shaped belonging, harm recognition, and the relational work required to sustain equity-centered leadership.

The findings across Chapters 4 and this chapter address the four research questions by showing that equity leadership in the superintendency is produced through a developmental process of identity-conscious meaning making situated within racialized, gendered, and political systems. Chapter 4 established this foundation through the 10 case vignettes and Finding A, demonstrating that leadership identity was not fixed but constructed over time through reflection, relational learning, sponsorship, and repeated encounters with power, legitimacy, and purpose. Superintendents’ pathways into the role were nonlinear and relational, shaped by mentorship, being “tapped” into leadership, insider–outsider dynamics, and early opportunities to make meaning of responsibility and authority. Building on that foundation, the findings in this chapter illuminate how those identity constructions were tested, constrained, and sustained once superintendents encountered the full emotional, political, and racialized weight of the role.

The findings show how White women superintendents navigated gendered expectations and racial privilege, engaged in equity-centered transformation amid resistance and structural limits, and increasingly recognized and responded to Whiteness as a systemic force shaping leadership practice. Together, these integrated findings form a conceptual bridge that sustains the empirical analysis in dialogue with applied critical leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012), critical Whiteness theory (Ahmed, 2004; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997), and inclusive leadership theory (Young & Arnold, 2020).

Chapter 6 builds on these findings by synthesizing the themes from Chapters 4 and 5 into an emerging framework of iterative, identity-conscious leadership. This chapter situates the

framework within broader theoretical and practical conversations and examines how equity-centered leadership is continually constructed, tested, and refined over time. Informed by superintendents' narratives, the discussion explores implications for superintendent preparation, professional learning, and system-level supports, and articulates policy and practice recommendations designed to strengthen leaders' capacity to disrupt inequitable structures amid the emotional, political, and racialized realities of the superintendency.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter integrates analysis, synthesis, and interpretive conclusions to clarify how White women superintendents construct meaning as they navigate equity-centered leadership in racially, linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse PK–12 systems. Drawing on life history interviews with 10 White women who currently serve or have previously served as superintendents in urban, suburban, and rural California districts, the chapter extends the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 into a coherent interpretive account. The districts represented in this study varied in size, demographic composition, governance stability, and resource conditions, creating distinct political and community contexts that shaped what equity-centered change could look like in practice (see Table 3.1).

Chapters 4 and 5 organized the data into three overarching findings with sub findings that captured superintendents' challenges, decisions, and meaning making across career stages and contexts. Table 6.1 provides a concise summary of the three overarching findings and associated subfindings presented in Chapters 4 and 5. These empirical patterns establish the analytic foundation for Chapter 6 by illustrating how superintendents constructed meaning about identity, responsibility, and equity-centered action within complex emotional, political, and structural contexts. The findings inform the emerging framework of iterative, identity-conscious superintendent leadership discussed in this chapter. Finding A, Constructing Leadership Identity: Identity as the Foundation of Leadership, demonstrated leadership as deeply reflective and relational, grounded in identity work, clarity of purpose, mentorship and sponsorship, trust building, and nonlinear pathways (A1–A4). Finding B, Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: A Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency, illuminated the emotional weight of the role and the political and structural realities that shaped what equity leadership could look like in practice (B1–B5). Finding C, Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, Access and Risk, clarified how Whiteness and gender shaped legitimacy, constrained leadership, and influenced superintendents' understanding of responsibility and risk as they disrupted inequitable systems (C1–C5). Across these findings, leadership appeared not as a technical function, but as iterative meaning making shaped by identity, emotion, purpose, relational trust, context, and structural power.

Table 6.1*Overview of Findings Informing the Interpretive Framework*

Empirical finding (Chs. 4–5)	Interpretive contribution to Chapter 6 framework
A. Constructing Leadership Identity	Demonstrates that equity-centered superintendent practice develops through ongoing identity-conscious meaning making. Superintendents construct purpose, authority, and responsibility through reflection, relational learning, and nonlinear developmental pathways.
A1. Identity-conscious dispositions and internal work	Identity awareness functions as a foundational condition shaping how superintendents interpret context and take action.
A2. Purpose, vision, and meaning making	A moral “North Star” anchors superintendent decision making amid complexity and conflict.
A3. Relational leadership, mentorship, and trust	Cross-racial mentorship, sponsorship, and trust-building create relational conditions that sustain equity-centered superintendent practice.
A4. Nonlinear pathways and inquiry	Superintendent development unfolds through iterative cycles of inquiry, adaptation, and insider–outsider positioning.
B. Leading Collaboratively in Isolation	Reveals how equity-centered superintendent practice is enacted within emotional, political, and structural constraints that shape sustainability.
B1. Emotional weight and loneliness	Emotional labor operates as a structural condition of the superintendency rather than an individual limitation.
B2. Moral imperative of equity leadership	Equity commitments intensify superintendents’ sense of responsibility while increasing exposure to resistance.
B3. Navigating power and politics	Governance dynamics, stakeholder expectations, and resource realities shape the scope and pace of superintendent action.
B4. Building collective capacity	Developing co-conspiratorship and shared leadership distributes responsibility for equity-focused change.
B5. Sustaining trust and long-term direction	Superintendents balance short-term conflict with long-term equity commitments across shifting political contexts.
C. Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities	Clarifies how superintendents’ dual positionality shapes legitimacy, risk, meaning making, and transformational action.
C1. Gendered expectations and tone policing	Gender norms regulate how superintendent authority and emotional expression are interpreted.
C2. Whiteness, access, and risk	Racial privilege simultaneously enables institutional access and creates ethical responsibility in equity work.

Table 6.1 continued

Empirical finding (Chs. 4–5)	Interpretive contribution to Chapter 6 framework
C3. Intentional transformational action	Superintendents restructure programs, routines, and resource allocations to disrupt inequitable conditions.
C4. Barriers and glass-cliff dynamics	Structural gatekeeping shapes superintendent opportunity, scrutiny, and vulnerability.
C5. Layered identities shaping equity work	Intersecting identities influence harm recognition, belonging, and relational accountability in superintendent practice.

Rather than treating theory as a discrete or linear stage of analysis, the discussion that follows integrates applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness theory, and inclusive leadership theory into the interpretation of the empirical patterns. The frameworks are woven into the interpretation of the empirical patterns, consistent with the study's commitment to understanding leadership as relational, contextually situated, and shaped by structural inequities (Ahmed, 2004b; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021; Young & Arnold, 2020). This integrated analysis culminates in an emerging framework of iterative identity-conscious leadership, which conceptualizes equity-centered superintendent practice as cyclical and recursive: leaders engage in identity-conscious reflection, cultivate relational trust and shared responsibility, take equity-centered action within structural constraints, and then recalibrate in response to new political, emotional, and organizational system conditions (see Figure 6.1).

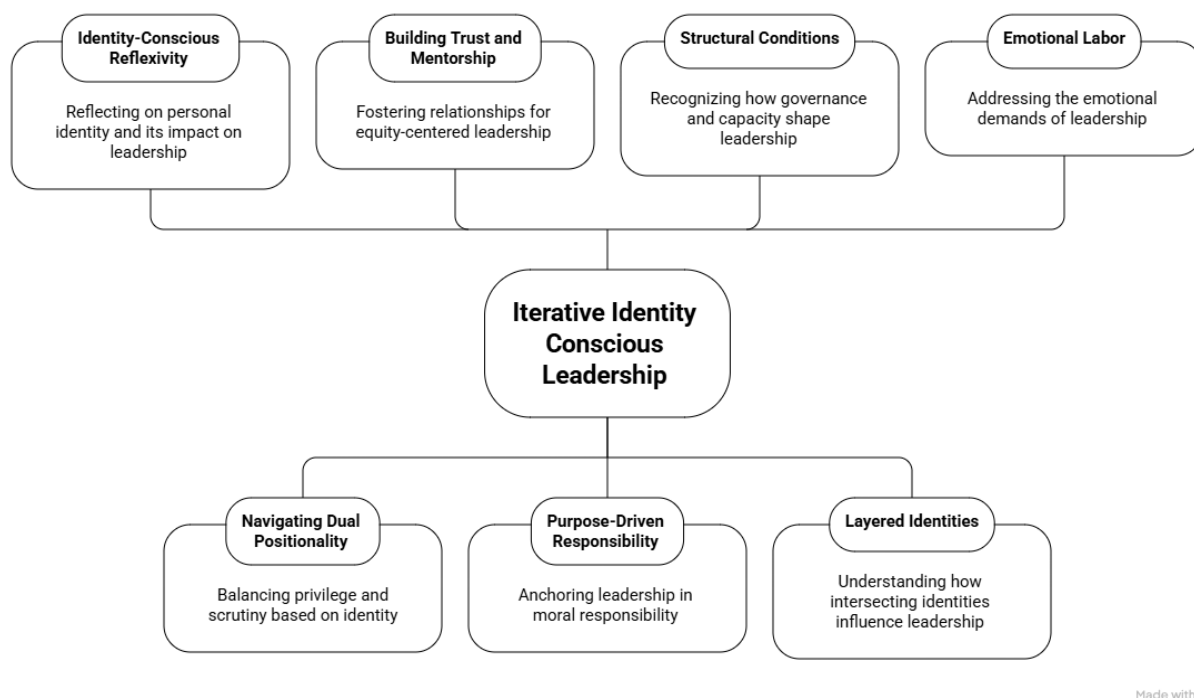


Figure 6.1 *Emerging Iterative Identity-Conscious Leadership Framework.* Figure 6.1 created by the author with the use of Napkin AI.

Figure 6.1 illustrates how equity-centered leadership emerges through the ongoing interaction of identity-conscious reflexivity, relational trust and mentorship, emotional labor, and structural conditions. This figure was developed from the findings that emerged through the perspectives and experiences of the superintendents in this study. It illustrates how leaders navigate dual positionality, purpose-driven responsibility, and layered identities as conditions that shape leadership practice. In doing so, the figure conceptualizes equity-centered leadership as an iterative and dynamic process grounded in identity awareness, relational practice, and moral responsibility within PK–12 systems.

The conclusions of this study are organized to address the four research questions clearly and in an integrated way. The first question, which examines career pathways into the superintendency, is addressed primarily through the analysis of leadership identity development and is reflected in conclusions related to identity-conscious preparation and the role of mentorship and sponsorship. The second question, focused on how White women navigate intersecting dynamics of gender and racial privilege as they construct and revise leadership identity, is addressed through conclusions that examine dual positionality, legitimacy, and the ongoing negotiation of purpose and responsibility in practice. The third question considers the challenges and opportunities superintendents encounter as they lead equity-centered transformation. Conclusions related to

relational leadership, political navigation, and the conditions that sustain equity-focused change speak most directly to this area. The fourth question explores how superintendents recognize, name, and respond to Whiteness as both an identity and a systemic force shaping leadership contexts and decisions. This dimension is reflected in conclusions addressing identity awareness, institutional constraints, and the risks of disrupting established norms.

Across all four questions, leadership meaning making emerged as dynamic and iterative rather than linear. This pattern aligns with constructivist qualitative traditions that understand professional identity as continuously shaped through experience, reflection, and interaction (Charmaz, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). Superintendents' narratives frequently returned to moral purpose alongside recognition of emotional and political demands. Melissa Quinn articulated her guiding principle as ensuring that "all students should feel seen, heard, and valued, and know their inherent worth and capacity." Susan Greer similarly anchored her leadership in a visible reminder of purpose, pointing to the sign above her office door—"The children are waiting"—as an everyday reminder. These statements were not merely inspirational expressions; they served as anchors for sensemaking, helping leaders interpret conflict, manage uncertainty and loneliness, and determine appropriate action when equity commitments collided with institutional resistance.

A central analytic thread across the findings was superintendents' evolving engagement with Whiteness. Whiteness was sometimes named explicitly and sometimes referenced indirectly or left unspoken. This uneven naming was not treated as a limitation of the data but as evidence of a developmental arc in racial consciousness that reflects the normativity and invisibility of Whiteness in educational leadership and district life (Ahmed, 2004b; Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 2019; Leonardo, 2009). Moments of dissonance, cross-racial mentorship, community critique, or confrontation with inequitable outcomes were often shared as making Whiteness newly visible, prompting shifts in how superintendents understood legitimacy, responsibility, and risk.

At the same time, from a critical Whiteness perspective, these moral frames warrant careful interrogation. Although moral purpose helped sustain superintendents' persistence and clarify difficult decisions, it also carried the risk of individualizing equity leadership and reinscribing Whiteness by centering personal resolve rather than the structural and historical conditions that produce inequity. When moral purpose becomes the primary interpretive lens, it can inadvertently recenter Whiteness by positioning White leaders' ethical intentions, endurance, or self-understanding as the focal point of equity work, rather than sustaining attention on those most impacted by systemic harm (Ahmed, 2004b; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021). In moments of resistance, most superintendents shared that moral purpose served as both an internal compass and a protective frame, enabling them to sustain their commitment while potentially obscuring how institutional norms, governance structures, and racialized systems constrained the scope of change. Thus, moral purpose functioned as a stabilizing force for equity leadership, even as it illuminated the ongoing tension White women superintendents navigate between ethical intent and the imperative to decenter themselves while disrupting systems in which they remain positioned with racial advantage. The analysis that

follows uses this arc to illuminate how leadership identity becomes iterative and identity-conscious over time.

All superintendents revealed that leadership identity emerged across cases as continually constructed rather than fixed. Consistent with applied critical leadership, superintendents described identity-conscious reflection as foundational to their leadership practice, not as a preliminary step but as an ongoing mode of decision making (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021). In Finding A, Constructing Leadership Identity: Identity as the Foundation of Leadership, superintendents described internal identity work grounded in values alignment, reflexivity, and learning to “take up space” with purpose as White women leaders (A1). This work was anchored by a moral orientation, a North Star, that shaped how leaders interpreted urgency and ethical tension (A2). Reflection functioned as a catalyst for action rather than detached introspection. Most superintendents described how navigating inequitable systems, fiscal crises, or direct challenge from students, families, or colleagues prompted deeper inquiry into race, power, privilege, and leadership (A1, A4). They described how their career pathways were frequently nonlinear (A4), shaped by insider or outsider status, unplanned opportunities, and cycles of inquiry, reflection, and evidence-informed decision making. These pathways were not simply professional sequences; they were identity-making processes through which leaders learned what kinds of authority were granted, resisted, or conditional.

Inclusive leadership theory (Young & Arnold, 2020) helps clarify why this identity construction was inseparable from relationships. In Finding A, superintendents consistently emphasized relational leadership and trust building as prerequisites for doing equity work (A3). Mentorship and sponsorship, often cross-racial and frequently from women of color, were described as formative in shaping superintendents’ understanding of responsibility, allyship, and the ethics of using positional power. These relationships functioned as accountability structures that pushed superintendents to move beyond individualistic narratives of merit and toward structural understandings of inequity (Young & Arnold, 2020). Several superintendents described a deliberate commitment to lifting up other women, particularly women of color, as a response to their own experiences of exclusion and gatekeeping.

Yet the findings also surfaced an enduring tension: although all superintendents sought to act in alignment with equity commitments and critical reflection, they often did so in systems not designed to sustain or reward such approaches. Critical Whiteness theory (Owen, 2007) clarifies how this tension is produced by the hegemony of Whiteness, which structures expectations about what counts as legitimate leadership and what can be named as political (Ahmed, 2004b; Mills, 1997). When equity leadership disrupts entrenched routines and redistributes power, it may trigger resistance that is framed as concern for neutrality, unity, or professionalism. This finding helps explain why participants in this study named Whiteness in uneven and often cautious ways. As their awareness of identity and power deepened, they also encountered institutional norms that shape what can be said about race and how it can be communicated (Ahmed, 2004b; Trepagnier, 2010). Consistent with scholarship on the superintendency, participants described working within governance and political contexts that reward stability, consensus, and strategic

messaging, influencing how directly they engaged structural inequities (Tallerico, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Weiner et al., 2023). Their experiences also reflected the gendered expectations of the role, including heightened scrutiny and credibility negotiations that further complicated public naming of inequity (Bernal et al., 2017; Weiner et al., 2023).

This dynamic became especially pronounced in Finding B, *Leading Collaboratively in Isolation: The Paradox of Emotional, Political, and Systemic Demands of the Superintendency*, which illuminated how emotional labor, political negotiation, and structural realities shaped what equity leadership could look like in practice (B1–B5). All superintendents described the superintendency as both meaningful and profoundly isolating, characterizing the role as a lifestyle that required holding the emotional weight of entire systems while often also managing significant family and caregiving responsibilities (B1). Leadership for equity was experienced as a moral and identity-based responsibility (B2). Most superintendents described facing resistance when naming inequities, reallocating resources, or challenging racialized and gendered norms. Critically, this resistance was often framed as change management concerns rather than as opposition to equity itself, a pattern that critical Whiteness theory helps interpret as the protection of White comfort and institutional stability (Ahmed, 2004a; Leonardo, 2009). In these contexts, superintendents seemed to frequently internalize the burden of harm reduction while simultaneously needing to maintain legitimacy with boards, unions, and community stakeholders (B2, B3).

Structural constraints intensified these conditions. Superintendents described navigating complex political contexts shaped by board dynamics, union relationships, community expectations, and resource limitations (B3). Superintendents in smaller or under resourced districts described assuming responsibilities typically distributed across multiple roles in larger systems, limiting their capacity for strategic leadership (B3). Inclusive leadership theory (Young & Arnold, 2020) helps interpret how superintendents responded: rather than “going it alone,” many intentionally built collective capacity (B4). They developed co-conspirators, distributed leadership, and relied on mentorship and sponsorship to share the intellectual, emotional, and political weight of equity work (B4). Over time, most superintendents articulated clearer guardrails for ethical and sustainable leadership (B5), including expectations for functional infrastructure, realistic role scope, and alignment between equity commitments and governance priorities. These guardrails represent key moments in the iterative leadership identity cycle: leaders reflect, act, experience constraint, and recalibrate what is sustainable.

Finding C, *Leading for Equity Through Layered Identities: Gender, Race, Access, and Risk* deepened this analysis by examining how leadership was shaped by layered identities operating within intersecting systems of gender and race (C1–C5). Superintendents described gendered expectations, tone policing, and credibility gaps that shaped how their leadership was received and how they navigated authority (C1). At the same time, many named how Whiteness structured access, legitimacy, and institutional comfort (C2). When asked directly about Whiteness, many superintendents described how it opened doors along the way, particularly in predominantly White or politically conservative communities, where they were more readily perceived as credible and capable (C2). This access, however, was accompanied by heightened responsibility and risk as

leaders learned to name and leverage privilege without centering White comfort. Superintendents described a developmental shift from earlier narratives grounded in neutrality or merit toward more explicit recognition that Whiteness shapes legitimacy, belonging, and authority.

Critical Whiteness theory, in dialogue with feminist scholarship, helps illuminate this dual positionality: as White women, superintendents benefited from racial privilege while also encountering sexism and, for some, additional marginalization related to immigration, religious identity, sexual orientation, or family composition (Ahmed, 2004a; Mills, 1997; Weiner et al., 2023; White, 2023). Superintendents also described confronting structural barriers and gatekeeping, including opaque hiring processes, informal networks, and glass-cliff appointments into unstable roles (C4), dynamics documented in scholarship on gendered leadership access (Tallerico, 2000; Weiner, 2023; White, 2023). Despite these constraints, superintendents acted with intentionality to disrupt racialized systems (C3). They described restructuring programs, reallocating resources, and embedding equity questions into everyday practice as deliberate efforts to enact transformation (C3). Inclusive leadership theory helps interpret these actions as structural rather than symbolic: leaders sought to redesign routines so that historically marginalized voices were not merely consulted but meaningfully included in shaping decisions (Young & Arnold, 2020). These actions reflect a broader body of scholarship suggesting that sustained equity work depends on changing everyday routines, relationships, and decision-making structures, rather than simply diversifying who holds leadership roles (Ahmed, 2004b; Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2007; Weiner et al., 2023). Across the study, superintendents' experiences suggested that equity leadership is fundamentally organizational work that reshapes how power is exercised and how improvement unfolds over time, rather than simply changing who holds formal leadership positions (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Shah et al., 2023; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Across all three findings, the analysis converges on an emerging framework of iterative identity-conscious leadership. Figure 6.2 illustrates how this emerging framework conceptualizes superintendent leadership for equity as a recursive inquiry cycle: leaders engage in identity-conscious reflection (How am I positioned? What is mine to do? What am I responsible for?), cultivate relational trust and shared responsibility (Who must be in this work with me? How do we redistribute voice and authority?), take equity-centered action (What structures must change? What decisions redistribute opportunity and reduce harm?), and then respond to context and constraint (What resistance emerged? What did this cost? What must be recalibrated to sustain the work?). The cycle repeats because the conditions of leadership shift: governance changes, community politics evolve, resource realities tighten or expand, and leaders' own racial consciousness develops over time. Leadership identity, in this framework, is not mentioned as a stable trait but as a process repeatedly produced through these cycles.

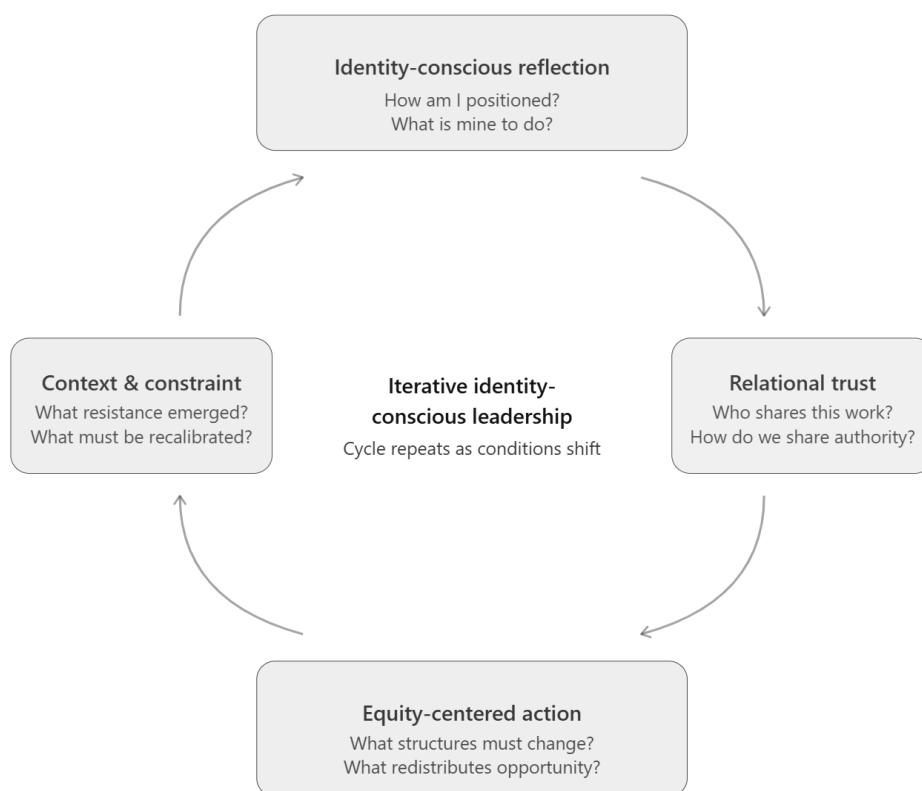


Figure 6.2 *Emerging Iterative Identity Conscious Leadership Inquiry Cycle*

6.1. Conclusions

The interpretive conclusions that follow and that are outlined in Table 6.2 align the study's major empirical patterns with the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, offering an integrated interpretation across chapters. Rather than restating results, this section integrates participants' narratives, cross-case themes, and analytic insights to clarify what these findings collectively revealed about identity-conscious, equity-centered leadership in the superintendency.

Table 6.2*Summary of Conclusions*

Conclusion	Statement	Theoretical implication
Conclusion 1	Identity-conscious reflection is foundational to leadership practice.	Leadership practice was grounded in sustained reflection on identity, power, and positionality, shaping how superintendents interpreted responsibility and authority.
Conclusion 2	Whiteness and gender simultaneously conferred legitimacy and access while intensifying scrutiny and constraint.	Superintendents navigated dual positionality in which racial privilege facilitated entry and credibility, while gendered norms produced heightened evaluation and conditional acceptance.
Conclusion 3	Cross-racial trust, mentorship, and sponsorship enabled and sustained equity-centered leadership.	Relational accountability and support functioned as developmental and sustaining infrastructures that shaped learning, legitimacy, and endurance in equity leadership.
Conclusion 4	Transformation emerged when equity was framed as a core responsibility that guided leadership meaning-making and practice.	Equity-centered leadership was strongest when anchored in moral responsibility and structural accountability rather than compliance or performative commitment.
Conclusion 5	Structural conditions and context set boundaries for the scope, pace, and risk of equity leadership.	Equity leadership is structurally bounded and co-produced by governance norms, political context, and organizational capacity, requiring authorization and protection beyond individual will.
Conclusion 6	Layered identities shaped empathy, belonging, and how institutional harm was recognized.	Intersections of identity influenced leaders' recognition of harm and belonging while remaining embedded within racialized systems that continued to confer privilege through Whiteness.
Conclusion 7	Emotional labor functioned as a structural condition of the superintendency, shaping the role's sustainability and longevity.	Emotional sustainability is produced through institutional design and power relations and cannot be treated as individual resilience alone.

6.1.1. Conclusion 1: Identity-Conscious Reflexivity Is Foundational to Leadership Practice

Across the data, leadership identity was shaped through sustained reflection on values, positionality, bias, and responsibility. Identity work did not appear as optional; it functioned as an ongoing practice through which superintendents refined judgment and equity-centered action (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021; Shields, 2010). Many described moving away from explanations grounded in individual effort toward structural understandings of inequity, a shift catalyzed by mentorship, dissonance, and accountability across difference (Ahmed, 2004a; Leonardo, 2009).

6.1.2. Conclusion 2: Whiteness and Gender Simultaneously Conferred Legitimacy and Access While Intensifying Scrutiny and Constraint

Whiteness often yielded institutional legitimacy and presumed competence, while gender produced credibility gaps and affective expectations. When combined with the positional authority of the superintendency, these identity dimensions interacted in ways that intensified scrutiny and, paradoxically, generated distrust from multiple directions. Superintendents navigated double binds related to tone, authority, and emotional expression, a pattern consistent with scholarship on gendered evaluation (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Rosette et al., 2016). Critical Whiteness theory clarifies how these dynamics preserve hegemonic stability by regulating what can be named, disciplining who may speak with authority, and prioritizing institutional comfort over disruption (Ahmed, 2004a; Mills, 1997).

6.1.3. Conclusion 3: Cross-Racial Trust, Mentorship, and Sponsorship Enabled and Sustained Equity-Centered Leadership

Relational trust was not ancillary to equity leadership; it was central to it. Mentorship and sponsorship functioned as developmental and sustaining infrastructures, shaping learning, legitimacy, and endurance. Superintendents described cross-racial mentorship relationships as particularly formative, noting how mentors of color often challenged their assumptions, sharpened their understanding of Whiteness, and modeled identity-conscious leadership grounded in accountability rather than comfort. These relationships expanded leaders' interpretive capacity and helped disrupt insular decision making, especially in moments of political resistance or moral uncertainty.

Inclusive leadership theory (Young & Arnold, 2020) helps clarify how such relationships redistributed responsibility and deepened belonging by positioning learning as relational and reciprocal, rather than hierarchical. At the same time, superintendents demonstrated growing awareness of the ethical imperative to engage cross-racial mentorship without reproducing inequitably distributed equity labor, recognizing that leaders of color are too often expected to carry disproportionate emotional, intellectual, and political burden in support of White leaders' development (Weiner et al., 2023; Young & Arnold, 2020). This tension underscored the need for

intentional, compensated, and institutionally supported mentoring structures that honor expertise without exploiting it.

6.1.4. Conclusion 4: Transformation Emerged When Equity Was Framed as a Core Responsibility Guiding Meaning Making and Practice

Equity leadership became most durable when anchored in moral responsibility and structural accountability rather than compliance or performative commitments. Rather than relying on symbolic gestures or externally driven mandates, superintendents described repeatedly returning to orienting questions about whose needs were centered, who bore the consequences of decisions, and what meaningful harm reduction required in practice. These questions functioned as guardrails, helping leaders resist pressure to prioritize institutional comfort, political expediency, or superficial demonstrations of commitment. This orientation aligns with applied critical leadership's emphasis on justice-oriented praxis that is grounded in action, reflection, and accountability (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2021), as well as scholarship that foregrounds the inherently political nature of equity work in educational systems (Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007).

Importantly, superintendents emphasized that grounding equity leadership in structural accountability was essential to avoid recentering Whiteness or reproducing White saviorism. By shifting attention away from individual intent, heroism, or moral self-concept and toward shared responsibility, system redesign, and community-defined outcomes, leaders sought to disrupt patterns in which White leaders are positioned as benevolent change agents rather than participants in systems requiring transformation (Ahmed, 2004; Allen & Liou, 2019; Leonardo, 2009; Love, 2019; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Shah et al., 2023). In this way, durable equity leadership was not defined by visibility or virtue, but by sustained alignment between values, structures, and the lived experiences of those most impacted by inequitable conditions.

6.1.5. Conclusion 5: Structural Conditions and Context Set Boundaries for the Scope, Pace, and Risk of Equity Leadership

Governance dynamics, political volatility, and organizational capacity significantly shaped what superintendents were able to sustain over time. Board instability, shifting community expectations, fiscal constraints, and inherited organizational fragility narrowed the range of actions that were politically feasible, regardless of leaders' intentions or technical competence. These constraints were not incidental to the work; they were embedded in the structure of the superintendency itself, positioning leaders within systems designed to absorb disruption while preserving institutional continuity.

Viewed through critical Whiteness theory, resistance framed as concerns about *tone*, *process*, or *pace* frequently functioned as regulatory mechanisms that maintained stability and protected White comfort, particularly when equity initiatives challenged established norms or redistributed authority (Ahmed, 2004b; Mills, 1997). Such framing allowed opposition to appear neutral or

procedural while disciplining leaders whose approaches unsettled racialized expectations of leadership.

6.1.6. Conclusion 6: Layered Identities Shaped Empathy, Belonging, and Recognition of Institutional Harm

Superintendents' layered identities, including age, sexuality, religion, immigrant background, interracial family relationships, parenting children with disabilities or children of color, and experiences of insider or outsider status, shaped how they interpreted exclusion, vulnerability, and responsibility, even as the structural advantages associated with Whiteness remained present. Participants described how experiences of gendered marginalization, outsider status, and heightened scrutiny shaped their sensitivity to harm and deepened their awareness of how institutional practices can undermine dignity and belonging. These experiences often sharpened ethical commitments to relational trust, inclusion, and care, particularly in moments when policies or governance norms conflicted with the lived realities of students, families, and staff.

At the same time, superintendents demonstrated growing awareness that these forms of marginalization did not erase the advantages conferred by Whiteness within educational systems. This tension required superintendents to hold vulnerability and responsibility simultaneously, recognizing how their own experiences of exclusion could inform equity leadership while remaining vigilant against conflating marginalization with racial oppression. In this way, layered identity functioned not as a claim to innocence but as a source of ethical accountability grounded in both empathy and structural awareness.

6.1.7. Conclusion 7: Emotional Labor Functioned as a Structural Condition of the Superintendency, Shaping Sustainability and Longevity

Emotional labor was integral to leadership, particularly when paired with equity commitments that disrupted institutional norms and surfaced conflict. Superintendents described sustained expectations to absorb tension, de-escalate opposition, and maintain relational stability, even as they advanced decisions that generated discomfort or resistance. These demands were disproportionately placed on women leaders, who were expected to be both resolute and soothing, authoritative yet emotionally accessible. At the same time, leaders operated within systems that regulate whose emotions are recognized as legitimate and whose are dismissed, disciplined, or pathologized, especially along gendered and racialized lines (Ahmed, 2004a; Gipson et al., 2017; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Manne, 2017; C. D. McRae, 2018).

Emotional labor intensified in equity-focused contexts, where naming harm, challenging dominant narratives, or redistributing resources often triggered backlash framed as concerns about tone, demeanor, professionalism, or process. These dynamics placed additional, often invisible, demands on leaders' emotional capacity while obscuring the structural conditions that produced the conflict in the first place. Thus, sustaining equity leadership requires structural attention to

how organizations and governance systems allocate emotional responsibility, rather than relying on individual leaders' capacity to endure.

Collectively, the conclusions of this study point to equity-centered superintendent leadership as an iterative and relational practice shaped through the interaction of identity, emotional labor, political context, and structural conditions. Superintendents made meaning of responsibility and authority as they navigated dual positionality, cultivated trust across difference, and pursued transformational change within systems that both enabled and constrained their efforts. These conclusions highlight that sustaining equity leadership requires more than individual commitment or technical expertise; it depends on organizational and governance conditions that support identity-conscious reflection, shared responsibility, and collective capacity for change. Framed in this way, equity-centered leadership emerges as developmental and context-responsive work situated within broader institutional arrangements. Building on this interpretive synthesis, in Chapter 7, I translate these conclusions into implications and recommendations for leadership practice, superintendent preparation, governance, and future research to strengthen the conditions under which equity-centered transformation can take hold and endure.

Chapter 7

Implications and Recommendations

This study has shown that equity-centered leadership in the superintendency is not simply an individual approach or set of leadership strategies; it is a practice shaped through the ongoing interaction of identity, relationships, and systems. The findings of this study show that superintendents' efforts to lead for equity were constructed through continuous meaning making about responsibility, authority, and purpose within complex organizational and community contexts. Leadership actions were shaped by how superintendents made sense of their dual positionality, developed trust across difference, and navigated institutional expectations that simultaneously enabled and limited equity-centered change.

The experiences of the superintendents in this study suggest that equity-centered leadership develops over time and is deeply shaped by the conditions in which leaders work. Rather than relying primarily on technical expertise or formal authority, superintendents sustained equity-focused action through identity-conscious reflection, relational accountability, and responsiveness to shifting political and organizational dynamics. This understanding directs attention toward the broader structures that shape leadership practice, including preparation pathways, governance relationships, professional learning networks, and opportunities for organizational learning. As outlined in Table 7.1, the study's interpretive conclusions are directly connected to actionable recommendations and the stakeholders best positioned to enact them, illustrating how responsibility for equity-centered leadership extends beyond individual leaders to the systems that prepare, support, and evaluate them. By aligning findings with specific recommendations and

audiences, the table provides a coherent framework for operationalizing these insights and advancing more intentional, system-level support for equity-centered leadership over time.

Table 7.1

Alignment of Interpretive Conclusions, Recommendations, and Primary Audiences

Conclusion	Interpretive claim	Aligned recommendation(s)	Primary audience
1. Identity-conscious reflexivity is foundational to leadership practice.	Equity leadership is constructed through sustained engagement with identity, power, and positionality rather than through technical competence alone.	Institutionalize identity-conscious leadership practice; Prepare leaders to engage in iterative identity-conscious leadership; Extend research on equity-centered leadership across identities and contexts.	Preparation programs; District leadership; Researchers
2. Whiteness and gender simultaneously conferred legitimacy and constraint.	Leadership authority was shaped by racialized access and gendered evaluation, influencing perceptions of credibility, risk tolerance, and leadership “fit.”	Align governance expectations and superintendent evaluation with equity leadership; Prepare leaders to navigate identity-situated leadership contexts; Extend research on leadership across identities and systems.	Boards of education; Preparation programs; Researchers
3. Cross-racial trust, mentorship, and sponsorship enabled sustainability.	Relational accountability functioned as an enabling infrastructure that supported learning, legitimacy, and endurance in equity-focused leadership.	Strengthen relational infrastructures that support shared leadership and accountability; Intentionally design ethical cross-racial mentorship and sponsorship; Examine governance and professional networks as relational supports.	Boards of education; Preparation programs; Professional networks; Researchers
4. Transformation emerged when equity was framed as a core leadership responsibility.	Equity-centered change was most durable when grounded in moral purpose and structural accountability rather than compliance-oriented reform.	Institutionalize identity-conscious leadership practice; Build inclusive decision-making and community engagement structures; Prepare leaders to enact justice-oriented leadership in politically complex environments.	Boards of education; District leadership teams; Preparation programs

Table 7.1 continued.

Conclusion	Interpretive claim	Aligned recommendation(s)	Primary audience
5. Structural conditions shaped the scope, pace, and risk of equity leadership.	Governance norms, role design, and organizational capacity co-produced leadership agency and constrained the possibilities for sustained change.	Align governance practices with equity priorities; Attend to superintendent role design and district capacity as equity issues; Reframe leadership sustainability as a system design responsibility; Study governance as relational infrastructure.	Boards of education; Policymakers; Researchers
6. Layered identities shaped recognition of harm and belonging.	Intersecting identity experiences informed leaders' ethical commitments and interpretations of institutional exclusion, even as they remained situated within racialized systems.	Institutionalize identity-conscious leadership learning; Strengthen relational conditions that support inclusive engagement; Design mentorship structures that support reciprocal identity learning.	Preparation programs; Boards of education; District leadership
7. Emotional labor functioned as a structural condition shaping sustainability.	Emotional demands were generated by political conflict, governance expectations, and the concentration of executive responsibility, rather than by individual coping capacity alone.	Recognize emotional sustainability as a system responsibility; Redesign leadership structures to distribute decision-making and relational burden; Prepare leaders for executive isolation and political pressure; Extend research on leadership sustainability.	Boards of education; Policymakers; Preparation programs; Researchers

7.1. Implications

Based on the findings from this study, equity-centered leadership in the superintendency should be understood as a practice shaped by how leaders engage with identity, power, and positionality as they interpret responsibility and exercise authority within complex organizational contexts. This perspective suggests that identity-conscious reflexivity is not an ancillary leadership disposition but a foundational condition informing how leaders make meaning of equity work and act on behalf of students and communities. Leadership preparation, governance expectations, and organizational learning structures, therefore, can move beyond technocratic and agentic models of leadership development by more intentionally and systematically embedding sustained reflection, relational accountability, and context-responsive decision making as universal expectations of effective leadership practice.

The study further demonstrates that Whiteness and gender operate simultaneously as mechanisms of legitimacy and limitation within district leadership contexts. White women superintendents experienced access to institutional validation while also navigating intensified scrutiny regarding tone, credibility, and leadership fit. These dynamics suggest that leadership evaluation systems, governance norms, and professional learning structures need to explicitly interrogate how racialized and gendered expectations shape perceptions of effectiveness, authority, and acceptable risk in leadership practice.

The findings also underscore the structural significance of cross-racial trust, mentorship, and sponsorship as enabling conditions for equity-centered leadership. Relational accountability has the possibility of operating not merely as interpersonal support but as an organizational infrastructure shaping leaders' capacity to act, learn, and persist in the face of resistance. This indicates that districts and preparation programs could move beyond informal approaches to relationship-building and instead intentionally design relational conditions that redistribute responsibility, sustain trust across lines of difference, and expand collective problem-solving capacity.

The moral framing of equity leadership also carries important implications. Transformation was most evident when superintendents constructed equity as a purpose-driven leadership responsibility rather than as a compliance-oriented mandate. This orientation shaped leaders' willingness to assume risk, challenge entrenched practices, and sustain focus on historically marginalized students and communities. Educational systems could therefore attend to how shared purpose, moral clarity, and collective accountability are cultivated so that equity work is institutionalized as a core leadership obligation rather than positioned as discretionary or politically conditional.

The findings also indicate that structural conditions, including governance norms, the design of the superintendent role, and district capacity, served as boundary-setting mechanisms that shaped the scope, pace, and perceived risk of equity-centered leadership. Findings point to leadership agency being co-produced through the interaction of individual commitments and organizational conditions, suggesting that analyses of equity leadership must account for how authority, resources, decision rights, and political expectations shape the possibilities for action. Equity-centered leadership cannot be fully understood without attention to how institutional design structures both opportunity and constraint.

Superintendents' layered identities also influenced how belonging, exclusion, and institutional harm were recognized and interpreted. Experiences associated with gender, professional trajectory, family life, and community engagement informed superintendents' empathetic orientations and their interpretations of inequity, even as these identities remained situated within broader systems of Whiteness. These findings suggest the importance of theorizing leadership identity as relational, evolving, and contextually constructed, thereby reinforcing the need for leadership development approaches that support ongoing identity meaning-making.

Emotional labor emerged as a structural feature shaping leadership sustainability and longevity in the superintendency. Rather than functioning primarily as an individual coping challenge, emotional demands were generated through governance conflict, political volatility, and the concentration of system-wide responsibility within a single executive role. This finding implies that leadership sustainability must be addressed through intentional system design, distributed leadership structures, and clearer boundary-setting practices rather than through individualized expectations of resilience or endurance.

The implications extend beyond individual leadership trajectories to illuminate the systems, structures, relationships, and learning conditions that enable and sustain equity-centered transformational leadership when White women hold district-level authority. The findings suggest that reshaping PK–12 systems historically structured by Whiteness and patriarchy requires sustained attention to governance practices, relational infrastructures, leadership preparation, and organizational learning conditions that collectively authorize equity-centered action.

This study contributes to scholarship on equity-centered educational leadership by demonstrating that transformational change in PK–12 systems is shaped not only by individual commitments and competencies but also by the relational, organizational, and governance conditions that structure leadership practice. By examining how White women superintendents navigate identity, power, and purpose within systems historically shaped by Whiteness and patriarchy, the findings illuminate both the possibilities and constraints associated with equity-centered leadership at the district level.

The emergent iterative identity-conscious leadership framework, illustrated in Figure 7.1, has the potential to further advance theoretical understanding by conceptualizing equity-centered leadership as a dynamic and recursive process. Leadership practice unfolds through ongoing cycles of reflection, relational engagement, action, and adaptation to shifting organizational, political, and cultural contexts. Superintendents repeatedly revisited questions of responsibility, positionality, and the redistribution of opportunity, underscoring that leadership development is best understood as an evolving practice rather than as the acquisition of fixed competencies. The framework also highlights the inherently collective nature of equity leadership, emphasizing the role of cross-racial accountability, shared decision-making, and distributed authority in sustaining transformational change.

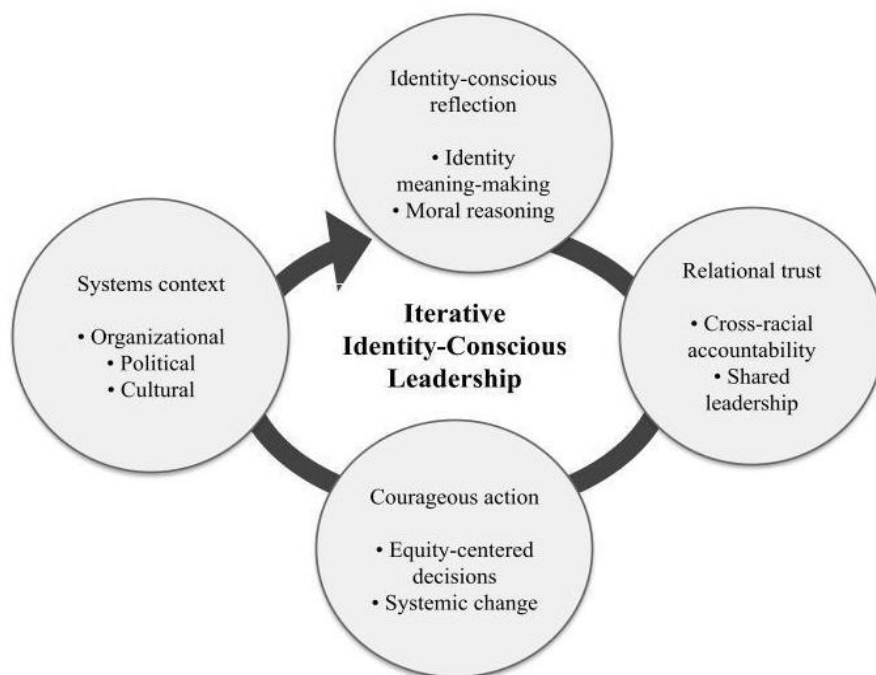


Figure 7.1 *Emerging Iterative Identity-Conscious Leadership Cycle*. Figure 7.1 was created by the author with the use of Napkin AI.

Figure 7.1 provides a conceptual bridge between the study's findings and the implications that follow by illustrating an emerging identity-conscious leadership cycle grounded in participants' experiences. The figure depicts equity-centered leadership as developing through ongoing cycles of identity-conscious reflection, relational engagement, action, and response to context. Leaders begin by engaging in meaning making about identity, power, and responsibility. This reflection informs the cultivation of relational trust, including cross-racial accountability and shared leadership. In turn, these relationships support courageous equity-focused action that challenges inequitable structures and practices. Because these actions unfold within complex organizational, political, and cultural environments, they create new conditions that call for further reflection and adaptation, reinforcing the recursive nature of leadership practice.

By portraying leadership as dynamic and situational rather than linear, the figure helps explain why the study's implications extend beyond individual leadership skill. The iterative cycle underscores that sustaining equity-centered practice depends on the broader conditions in which leaders work. The implications, therefore, call for greater attention to how preparation pathways, governance expectations, professional learning structures, and organizational routines can be redesigned to support identity-conscious reflection, relational accountability, and collective responsibility for change. Viewed through this lens, equity-centered transformation emerges as

iterative and context-responsive work that requires both personal commitment and institutional alignment if PK–12 systems are to more fully support belonging, dignity, and justice for students, families, educators, and communities.

School systems are shaped by governance structures, organizational conditions, professional norms, and political contexts that influence how superintendent leadership is authorized, supported, and constrained over time (Fullan, 2020; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Shields, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The implications of this study underscore the importance of institutional accountability in creating the conditions necessary for transformational, equity-centered leadership to emerge and endure (Allen & Liou, 2019; Shah et al., 2023; Theoharis, 2007). Advancing equity cannot rest on the efforts or intentions of individual superintendents alone; it requires shared commitments embedded in how systems are designed, governed, and enacted in daily practice (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Park et al., 2023; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). The recommendations that follow build on these conclusions by translating the study's interpretive insights into practical considerations across four interrelated domains: leadership practice and organizational design, policy and governance, superintendent preparation and leadership development, and future research.

7.2. Recommendations for Leadership Practice and Organizational Design

7.2.1. Recommendation 1: Institutionalize Identity-Conscious Leadership Practice

Educational systems should embed identity-conscious reflection as a routine dimension of leadership practice rather than relying on individual leaders' dispositions or personal commitments. Structures such as coaching, facilitated identity-conscious inquiry cycles, leadership learning communities, and cabinet- and board-level reflection routines can support sustained engagement with questions of identity, power, and positionality. These practices create opportunities for leaders to examine how decisions are experienced across difference and how leadership actions may reproduce or disrupt inequitable conditions. Institutionalizing identity-conscious meaning-making helps establish shared norms for equity-centered leadership rather than positioning such work as dependent on individual capacity.

7.2.2. Recommendation 2: Strengthen Relational Conditions That Enable Cross-Racial Accountability and Shared Leadership

Districts should intentionally design relational infrastructures that support the development of trust, shared responsibility, and inclusive decision making, without making this the superintendent's sole responsibility. Student advisory councils, family and community design teams, equity leadership teams, and cross-role collaborative spaces can create opportunities for leaders to engage meaningfully with those most affected by inequitable conditions. Boards of

education should ensure that relational practice is prioritized through expectations for superintendent evaluations, inclusive engagement, allocation of time and resources, and monitoring of how community voice informs decision making. Relational trust should be understood as a structural condition that enables equity-centered leadership, not solely as an interpersonal leadership skill.

7.2.3. Recommendation 3: Attend to Organizational Structures That Shape the Scope, Pace, and Risk of Equity Leadership

Superintendent role design, cabinet configuration, and central office capacity should be examined as conditions that influence what equity-centered leadership makes possible in practice. Decisions related to span of control, clarity of decision authority, communication expectations, and resource allocation shape leaders' ability to act on moral purpose and sustain coherent improvement efforts. Distributing leadership responsibility across cabinet teams, site leaders, and central office functions can create organizational conditions that support more consistent implementation of equity priorities and strengthen responsiveness to student and community needs.

7.2.4. Recommendation 4: Recognize Emotional Labor as a Structural Feature of Leadership Sustainability

Educational systems should treat emotional sustainability as a systemic responsibility rather than as an individual coping capacity. Governance expectations, political volatility, and the concentration of responsibility within the superintendent role can generate significant emotional and relational demands. Redesigning leadership structures to include shared decision-making, clearly articulated guardrails, and transparent boundaries around authority and availability can help redistribute emotional labor and support leadership continuity over time.

7.3. Recommendations for Policy and Governance

7.3.1. Recommendation 5: Align Governance Expectations With the Relational and Identity-Situated Nature of Equity Leadership

Boards of education should align governance practices and superintendent evaluation systems with an understanding that equity-centered leadership is enacted within racialized, gendered, and politically contingent organizational contexts. Rather than relying primarily on managerial or compliance-oriented indicators, evaluation frameworks can more explicitly assess progress toward equity goals, the cultivation of relational trust across communities, the development of inclusive decision-making structures, and superintendents' capacity to lead through conflict and public scrutiny associated with dual positionality. This approach recognizes that effective leadership in diverse PK–12 systems involves navigating complex social dynamics and advancing measurable organizational improvement.

To support this alignment, boards may benefit from structured learning and reflection on implicit bias, gendered leadership expectations, and how institutional norms shape perceptions of credibility, tone, and acceptable risk. Regular governance routines such as goal setting, superintendent evaluation cycles, board self-assessment, and community engagement processes can be intentionally designed to reinforce shared responsibility for equity outcomes. Clarifying expectations for transparent communication, collaborative problem solving, and long-term direction can help mitigate reactive decision making and create more stable conditions for transformational change.

Strengthening coherence between district vision, leadership practice, and accountability structures can also involve revisiting hiring processes, succession planning, and professional learning opportunities for both trustees and district leaders. When governance systems acknowledge the relational and identity-situated dimensions of leadership, they are better positioned to support superintendents in sustaining equity-centered work over time. Governance alignment can serve not only as a mechanism of oversight but also as a structural condition that enables more consistent, context-responsive progress toward inclusive and just educational outcomes.

7.4. Recommendations for Superintendent Preparation and Leadership Development

7.4.1. Recommendation 6: Prepare Leaders to Engage in Iterative Identity-Conscious Leadership Practice

Preparation programs should position equity-centered leadership as an ongoing process of reflection, action, and adaptation rather than as a fixed set of competencies. Integrating theoretical frameworks such as applied critical leadership, critical Whiteness theory, and inclusive leadership theory with practice-embedded learning experiences can allow aspiring superintendents to examine how identity, power, and moral responsibility shape leadership decisions. Residencies, governance simulations, and problem-based inquiry can create opportunities to practice navigating ambiguity, resistance, and competing expectations.

7.4.2. Recommendation 7: Intentionally Design Cross-Racial Mentorship and Sponsorship That Supports Reciprocal Learning

Leadership preparation programs, professional associations, and district networks should more deliberately design cross-racial mentorship and sponsorship structures that foster reciprocal learning, shared accountability, and sustained leadership growth. These relationships can create important spaces for identity-conscious dialogue, critical reflection, and the development of relational capacity to lead across difference. At the same time, such efforts must acknowledge and address the unequal equity labor that is often expected of leaders of color, particularly when mentorship is framed as a unidirectional transfer of cultural or experiential knowledge.

To support more equitable and meaningful engagement, mentorship and sponsorship models should establish clear purposes, defined expectations, and mutual commitments related to learning, advocacy, and professional advancement. Structured opportunities for joint inquiry, collaborative problem solving, and reflective practice can help ensure that these relationships move beyond informal networking toward intentional leadership development. Superintendent preparation programs could be strengthened through cohort-based structures, facilitated dialogue spaces, and leadership learning communities that support participants in examining how identity, power, and positionality influence decision making and organizational change.

7.4.3. Recommendation 8: Prepare leaders for the Structural Loneliness and Emotional Demands of the Superintendency

Leadership development efforts should explicitly recognize and address the isolation, visibility, and emotional demands associated with executive roles, particularly the superintendency. Preparation programs and professional learning structures can create intentional opportunities for superintendents to engage in peer networks, executive coaching, and facilitated reflection that support both professional growth and personal sustainability. These spaces allow leaders to process complex decisions, examine how identity and positionality shape their experiences, and develop strategies for navigating conflict while remaining grounded in equity commitments.

It is essential that superintendents understand that the loneliness often associated with the role is not a reflection of an individual emotional deficit or lack of resilience, but a structural feature of the position itself. Framing isolation in this way can reduce self-blame and encourage leaders to work collectively to design organizational routines, governance relationships, and leadership teams that distribute responsibility and create stronger relational support. Structured opportunities for collaborative inquiry and problem solving can strengthen superintendents' capacity to build and sustain trust across diverse stakeholder groups while maintaining focus on long-term equity goals amid political pressure and public scrutiny. Designing leadership development with this awareness acknowledges emotional labor as a systemic condition and reinforces the importance of collective learning and intentional system design in advancing equity-centered change.

7.5. Recommendations for Research

7.5.1. Recommendation 9: Extend Research on Equity-Centered Leadership Across Diverse Identities and Contexts

Future research should further examine how leadership practice is shaped by the interaction of layered identities and institutional contexts to clarify which experiences and patterns are specific to particular groups of superintendents and which reflect broader systemic dynamics within PK–12 education. In addition to race and gender, scholars could attend to dimensions such as age, family structure, generational educational attainment, caregiving responsibilities, sexuality, religion, and immigrant or first-generation backgrounds, as these factors may shape how leaders interpret authority, vulnerability, belonging, and responsibility in equity work. Comparative studies

across geographic, political, and governance contexts could deepen understanding of how identity and organizational conditions influence the enactment and sustainability of equity-centered leadership. Longitudinal research may also illuminate how superintendents' meaning making and practice evolve over time as they navigate shifting policy environments, community expectations, and reform pressures. Such inquiry can contribute to more nuanced theories of leadership development and inform the design of preparation programs, governance structures, and professional learning systems that more intentionally support equity-centered transformation.

7.5.2. Recommendation 10: Center Community Experience and Examine Governance as Relational and Emotional Infrastructure

Further inquiry should foreground the perspectives of students, families, educators, and community members in order to better understand how identity-conscious leadership is experienced in practice and how trust, legitimacy, and belonging are cultivated or eroded over time. Examining how different stakeholders interpret leaders' actions, communication, and decision-making can illuminate the relational conditions that enable equity-centered change to take root and be sustained. Participatory and community-engaged research designs may be particularly valuable in capturing how leadership practices are understood across lines of race, language, class, and role within school systems.

Research that attends to governance structures, evaluation processes, leadership pipelines, and professional networks as forms of relational and emotional infrastructure can further deepen understanding of how equity-centered leadership is supported or constrained. Such inquiry can help clarify how accountability systems, board–superintendent relationships, and opportunities for collaborative learning shape leaders' capacity to navigate identity, conflict, sustain moral purpose, and distribute responsibility for change. By examining these organizational dimensions alongside lived experiences, future studies can contribute to more sustainable approaches to leadership development and system transformation in PK–12 education.

7.6. Conclusion

As this study demonstrated, the superintendency becomes transformative not through positional authority alone, but through leaders' sustained interrogation of how identity, power, and systems shape decisions, responsibilities, and impact. For the White women in this study, leading for equity required continual recalibration of both self and system, anchored in moral purpose, relational trust, and an explicit commitment to naming and disrupting inequitable structures while attending to sustainability over time. These findings underscore that equity-centered leadership is not a fixed stance or a discrete set of competencies, nor the burden of individual leaders. Rather, it is an iterative, collective practice shaped through cycles of reflection, relational work, and shared accountability within complex institutional contexts.

The findings call for a fundamental reorientation of how the superintendency is imagined, prepared for, and sustained within PK–12 education. Transformational equity leadership cannot

rest on individual resolve, moral clarity, or personal endurance alone. It requires educational systems intentionally designed to support iterative, identity-conscious leadership, to confront and disrupt Whiteness and gendered norms embedded in leadership expectations, to normalize the emotional and political labor of the role, and to distribute responsibility for equity work across governance, preparation, and organizational structures. In this sense, equity-centered leadership is not produced by will alone, but by the systems and conditions that authorize, protect, and sustain leaders as they challenge racialized and gendered inequities. Future research must extend beyond individual leaders to examine how superintendent preparation programs, boards of education, and district systems actively shape meaning making, risk, and sustainability for White women superintendents. These institutions must be held accountable by us all for designing leadership pathways and conditions that make justice-oriented, transformational leadership not exceptional or precarious, but possible and enduring over time.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and Transformational Leadership

Research Questions

1. What are the career paths women take on their journey to the superintendency?
2. How do White women superintendents understand and navigate the intersecting influences of gender and racial privilege as they construct their leadership identities across their careers?
3. What challenges and opportunities do White women superintendents experience as they lead for equity-centered transformation?
4. How do White women superintendents recognize, name, and respond to Whiteness as a systemic force in the districts they lead, and how does this shape their equity leadership practice?

Interview 1: Life History and Leadership Foundations

Interview 1 established participants' leadership trajectories, identity formation, and early equity commitments. Questions were open-ended and narrative in nature to surface life history, professional context, and meaning making

Estimated Duration: 75–90 minutes

Format: Virtual, audio-recorded with consent

Background and Career Pathway (RQ1)

- How long have you been in your current (or most recent) superintendent role?
- What is your educational background and highest degree?
- How long were you in the classroom, and did you serve as a site leader or central office administrator?
- What district do you currently (or most recently) serve?

Leadership Identity and Development (RQ1, RQ2)

- What is your leadership story? What have been a high point and a low point in your journey, and why?
- What critical moments along your pathway shaped who you are as a leader today?

- What helped or hindered you on your path to the superintendency?
- How has being a White woman impacted your leadership journey?

Equity Policies and Systems (RQ3, RQ4)

- What policies or systems have you created, eliminated, or transformed as superintendent?
- What impact do you believe you have had on outcomes for historically marginalized students?
- How have you managed resources, decision making, and change in ways that advanced (or constrained) equity?

Leadership Practices and Support (RQ2, RQ3, RQ4)

- How do your leadership practices reflect your identity as a White woman superintendent?
- In what ways has Whiteness impacted your ability to lead or achieve results?
- What training, preparation, or support have you needed to become the leader you are today?
- How have you mentored or supported other women leaders?
- What advice would you offer to aspiring equity-focused women superintendents?

Interview 2: Semistructured Follow-Up and Deepening

Interview 2 deepened analysis of themes emerging from Interview 1, with particular attention to identity navigation, equity-centered decision making, and recognition of Whiteness in leadership practice. Questions were semistructured and tailored to each participant's prior responses.

Estimated Duration: 75–90 minutes

Format: Virtual, audio-recorded with consent

Example of Interview 2 Questions for Superintendent based on Interview 1

Opening Prompt

- Since our last conversation, what has stayed with you or felt important to revisit about your leadership or identity?

Career Pathways and Decision Points (RQ1)

- Looking back, what were the most significant turning points or “forks in the road” that shaped your path to the superintendency?

Gender, Whiteness, and Privilege (RQ2)

- In what ways have gender and Whiteness shaped how you have been perceived, supported, or challenged as superintendent?

Equity-Centered Transformation (RQ3)

- What has been most challenging, and most enabling, about leading equity-centered change as a White woman superintendent?

Recognizing and Responding to Whiteness (RQ4)

- How do you recognize Whiteness operating in your daily leadership practice, and how do you respond to it?

Closing / Member Check

- Of everything we discussed, what feels most important to capture accurately about your leadership?
- Is there anything we did not discuss that is essential to understanding your path or equity work?

Conclusion and Follow-Up

Thank you again for your time and willingness to share your experiences. Your perspectives are invaluable to understanding how White women navigate leadership, race, gender, and systemic change in public education. I will follow up with a transcript and emerging themes to ensure your voice is accurately represented. Please feel free to contact me at xxxx_xxxxx@berkeley.edu with any questions or additional reflections.

Appendix B

Preinterview Survey (via Qualtrics) Consent to Participate in Research

Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and Transformational Leadership

Introduction and Purpose

My name is Sara Stone. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, working with my faculty advisor, Professor Ozge Hacifazlıoğlu, in the School of Education. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which explores how White women superintendents navigate the intersection of racial privilege and gender-based marginalization as they lead for equity in PK–12 public education systems.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in my research, I will interview you at a mutually convenient time and location. The interview will involve questions about your leadership journey, your experiences as a White woman superintendent, and how you understand and navigate issues of race, gender, and equity in your role. Each interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be conducted via Zoom at a time of your choice. With your permission, I will audio-record and take notes during the interview. The recording is used solely to ensure accuracy and will be transcribed for research purposes only. If you choose not to be recorded, I will rely on detailed note-taking instead. If you agree to be recorded but feel uncomfortable or change your mind at any point, I will stop the recording immediately upon your request. You may also stop the interview at any time for any reason. I plan to conduct two interviews in total. However, brief follow-up contact may be necessary to clarify or confirm certain aspects of your responses. If so, I will reach out via email to schedule a short 15–20-minute follow-up conversation. No new topics will be introduced during the follow-up; only clarification or member-checking of the content previously shared will be discussed.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. However, it is hoped that the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how White women superintendents can lead more effectively and equitably in PK–12 education systems. The findings may inform leadership preparation programs, district hiring practices, and policies that support more inclusive and justice-oriented educational leadership. **Risks/Discomforts** Some of the interview questions may prompt reflection on personal experiences related to race, gender, leadership, or systemic inequities, which could cause discomfort. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to respond to, or to stop the interview at any time without any consequence. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, you may pause the interview, take a break, or withdraw from the interview altogether. Your well-being is a priority, and every effort will be made to ensure that you feel safe and respected throughout the process. As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk.

Confidentiality

Your study data will be handled confidentially. If the results of this study are published or presented, your name and other personally identifiable information will not be used. To minimize risks to confidentiality, all interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission and transcribed as soon as possible. Audio recordings will be stored on a secure, password-protected device and deleted immediately after transcription is complete. Transcripts and all study-related documents will be de-identified, coded with pseudonyms, and stored on a secure, encrypted server accessible only to the principal investigator and approved research personnel. Any identifying information will be removed from all data used in presentations or publications. I will retain de-identified transcripts and notes for up to five years after the study's conclusion, in case the findings are used for future research, publications, or presentations. The same confidentiality protections will apply to any future use of this data. Your personal information may be released if required by law. Authorized representatives from the University of California may review your research data to ensure the study is being conducted appropriately. Identifiers may be removed from the data, and the de-identified information may be used for future research without additional consent. However, no identifying information will be shared, and your confidentiality will be protected to the greatest extent possible.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and appreciated. Rights Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You are free to decline participation in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you decide to answer any questions or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions

Thank you again for your time and for sharing your experiences. Your perspectives are invaluable to understanding how White women navigate leadership, race, gender, and systemic change in public education. I will follow up with a transcript and emerging themes to ensure your voice is accurately represented. Please feel free to contact me at xxxx_xxxxx@berkeley.edu with any questions or additional reflections. You may also contact my advisor, Professor Ozge Hacıfazlıoğlu, at xxxxx@berkeley.edu. If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the University of California at Berkeley's Committee for Protection of Human Subjects at 510-642-7461, or e-mail subjects@berkeley.edu.

Q1 Full Name (for researcher use only; will be kept confidential and replaced with a pseudonym in all reports):

Q2 Preferred Pseudonym (optional):

Q3 Current or Most Recent Superintendent Position:

- Name of District (1)
- City of District (2)
- Number of students served (3)

Q4 Are you currently serving as a superintendent?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5 Total years of experience in education:

Q6 6. Do you identify as a White woman?

- Yes (1)
- No (If no, thank you for your interest. This study is focused on the experiences of White women superintendents.) (2)

Q7 7. Do you identify with any of the following? (Select all that apply)

- Jewish (1)
- LGBTQIA+ (2)
- Person with a disability (3)
- First-generation college graduate (4)
- Other (5)

Q8 Age Range:

- 30–39 (1)
- 40–49 (2)
- 50–59 (3)
- 60+ (4)
- Prefer not to say (5)

Q9 What types of districts have you worked in as a superintendent? (Select all that apply)

- Urban (1)
- Suburban (2)

- Rural (3)
- High-poverty district (4)
- Racially/linguistically diverse district (5)
- Other (please describe): _____ (6)

Q10 CONSENT If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

Q11 [Optional/If applicable] If you agree to allow your name or other identifying information to be included in all final reports, publications, and/or presentations resulting from this research, please sign and date below.

Appendix C

Codebook Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and Transformational Leadership

Overview of Analytic Framework

This codebook summarizes the analytic framework and coding structure used to analyze superintendent interview data and related documents. Codes are organized within five major themes derived from Applied Critical Leadership (ACL), Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT), and Inclusive Leadership Theory (ILT). Themes were refined through iterative coding, memoing, and constant comparison. Codes were applied across interviews and artifacts using iterative cycles of open, focused, and theoretical coding. Frequencies were used to assess salience, while analytic memos were used to surface meaning, contradiction, and power dynamics. The codebook reflects patterned meaning across participants rather than individual traits

Each subtheme includes:

- an operational memo/definition
- aggregated frequency counts across all transcripts
- alignment to higher-order findings (see Appendix A)

Frequencies indicate salience, not importance.

Table C1

Summary of Themes and Frequencies

Theme	Total frequency	% of total codes
Leadership Dispositions & Practice	172	23
Emotional & Political Terrain of Leadership	127	17
Equity, Systems Change, & Impact	93	13
Leadership Journey & Identity Development	124	17
Whiteness, Gender, & Structural Context	222	30
Total	738	100

Note. Approximately 773 total references, including minor or uncoded items.

Theme 1: Leadership Dispositions and Practice

Core Focus: How superintendents lead with authenticity, reflection, and courage while centering people and purpose.

Total References: 172

Table C2

Theme 1: Leadership Dispositions and Practice

Subtheme	Memo/definition	Frequency
Equity-Driven Leadership	Building inclusive, diverse teams and distributing leadership; warm-demander stance grounded in equity.	25 (Commitment to Diverse Teams 23; Distributed 1; Warm 1)
People & Program Builder	Leading change by building people and programs; joy found in growth and challenge.	4 (Loved Building 2; Invigorated 2)
Trust & Collaboration	Relational trust, collaboration, shared problem solving; hiring for collective capacity.	14 (Build Trust 9; Hiring Smarter 1; Trust Instincts 4)
Reflective Decision Making	Inquiry mindset; data-informed practice; balancing evidence and intuition for equity.	20 (Inquiry 14; Uses Data 6)
Grounded Authenticity	Knowing self; humble confidence; patience and urgency; cultural humility and reflexivity.	109 (Knowing 40; Humble 18; Patience 19; Cultural Humility 32)

Theme 2: Emotional and Political Terrain of Leadership

Core Focus: The psychological, relational, and political complexity of leading within contested systems.

Total References: 127

Table C3

Theme 2: Emotional and Political Terrain of Leadership

Subtheme	Memo/definition	Frequency
Boundaries & Sustainability	Protecting well-being; setting limits; balancing personal and professional demands.	37 (Mine 33; Staffing 1; Lifestyle 3)
Resilience & Advocacy	Endurance, courage, and moral advocacy within complex political landscapes.	33
Navigating Power & Politics	Managing board relations, perceptions, insider/outsider status, and systemic pushback.	57 (Politics 10; Outsider 4; Resistance 13; Perception 30)

Theme 3: Equity, Systems Change, and Impact

Core Focus: How equity becomes operationalized through clarity, experimentation, and co-leadership.

Total References: 93

Table C4

Theme 3: Equity, Systems Change, and Impact

Subtheme	Memo/definition	Frequency
Vision & Adaptive Learning	Equity clarity paired with iterative, safe-to-fail learning and improvement.	62 (North Star 39; Safe-to-Fail 1; Change 22)
Collective Responsibility	Shared accountability; naming complicity; practicing co-conspiratorship.	25 (Complicity 12; Co-Conspiratorship 12; Culture 1)
Resource & Structural Equity	Aligning fiscal, human, and time resources to equity priorities.	6

Theme 4: Leadership Journey and Identity Development

Core Focus: The lived experiences that shape who leaders become and how they claim space.
Total References: 124

Table C5

Theme 4: Leadership Journey and Identity Development

Subtheme	Memo/definition	Frequency
Boundaries & Sustainability	Protecting wellbeing; setting limits; balancing personal and professional demands.	37 (Mine 33; Staffing 1; Lifestyle 3)
Resilience & Advocacy	Endurance, courage, and moral advocacy within complex political landscapes.	33
Navigating Power & Politics	Managing board relations, perceptions, insider/outsider status, and systemic pushback.	57 (Politics 10; Outsider 4; Resistance 13; Perception 30)

Theme 5: Whiteness, Gender, and Structural Context

Core Focus: The interplay of racialized and gendered systems in shaping leadership access and perception.
Total References: 222

Table C6

Theme 5: Whiteness, Gender, and Structural Context

Subtheme	Memo/definition	Frequency
Intersectional Identity	Complex identities (first-gen, family, race, gender intersections) shaping worldview.	44 (Other Intersections 8; First-Gen 1; Family 35)
Systemic Barriers & Expectations	Gendered and racialized burdens; glass cliffs; age-based assumptions.	39 (Expectations 2; Onramps 30; Glass Cliff 6; Age 1)
Institutional Power Structures	Structural levers—boards, pipelines, representation—shaping access and retention.	100 (Boards 27; Pipeline 33; Gender 40)
Whiteness & Reflexivity	Recognizing and disrupting the impact of Whiteness in leadership and decision making.	39 (Transformational 11; Impacts 28)