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Breaking Barriers: A Comparative Case Study of Women of Color Who Rise to School
Superintendency

By

Tu Moua Carroz

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Erin Murphy-Graham, Chair

Professor Jabari Mahiri

Professor Chunyan Yang

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Abstract

Breaking Barriers: A Comparative Case Study of Women of Color Who Rise to School Superintendency

by

Tu Moua Carroz

Doctor of Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Erin Murphy-Graham, Chair

The role of the K–12 school superintendency remains predominantly white and male. However, there has been a slight increase in racial and gender diversity in the past several decades, as documented in the American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study. The American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) 2020 decennial study revealed the number of female superintendents grew from 13.1% in 2000 to 24.1% in 2010, and most recently has increased slightly to 26.7% as of 2020. Still, very little scholarship exists on centering the experiences of women of color who have risen to the school superintendency. This study aims to address this research gap through the following questions: (1) What are the career paths women of color take on their journeys to the superintendency? (2) How does a woman's specific racial ethnic background get reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency? (3) What skills, strategies, and support have contributed to the success of women of color in the superintendency? In this qualitative comparative case study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six women of color superintendents and two search firm consultants from the state of California. Findings reveal the following: 1) that career paths for these women of color superintendents include both formal and informal preparation to meet the political demands of the superintendency, and their ascension to the superintendency was obtained primarily through the instructional leadership roles, although non-instructional experiences were desirable; 2) that the search and selection process, the role of search consultants, and the school board composition and politics implicate challenges and opportunities related to a woman's racial and ethnic background; and 3) the resilience factors and support systems that contribute to the success of women of color in the superintendency. Findings offer empirical support for women of color aspiring to serve in the superintendency and have several implications for leadership, school board, and system practices and policies toward improving diversity at the highest appointed leadership position in K–12 educational systems.

Dedication

My research is dedicated to my mother, who did not receive the opportunity to obtain a formal education simply because she was born a daughter. Through my mother's courage, perseverance, resilience, love, and grace, she has taught me that anything is possible as long as I am willing to put in the hard work, time, and effort to achieve my dreams. THIS is a dream come true.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Chapter 1: Breaking Barriers.....	1
Background.....	1
Organizational Structure of the Dissertation.....	1
Statement of the Problem: Disparities in Representation of Women of Color in the School Superintendency.....	2
Research Questions.....	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	4
Conceptual Framework.....	4
Systemic Underrepresentation of Women of Color in the Superintendency.....	5
Risk and Resilience Factors for Women of Color as Superintendents.....	8
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	13
Preparing for the Study: A Pilot Study.....	13
Research Design.....	14
Participants.....	15
Data Collection Process.....	17
Data Analysis.....	18
Limitations of the Study.....	19
Positionality and Experiential Knowledge of Researcher.....	20
Chapter 4: Vignettes and Career Maps.....	21
Case Study 1: Superintendent Maria Sanchez.....	21
Case Study 2: Superintendent Olga Huevo.....	22
Case Study 3: Superintendent Harriet Young.....	23
Case Study 4: Superintendent Angela Jones.....	25
Case Study 5: Superintendent Irene Kim.....	25
Case Study 6: Superintendent Christy Manalo.....	26
Case Study 7: Search Consultant Maggie Rodriguez.....	28
Case Study 8: Search Consultant Norma Flores.....	29
Chapter 5: The Career Path Toward the Superintendency.....	31
Finding 1: Variable Routes of Formal Preparation for the Superintendency.....	31
Finding 2: Political Acumen and Relationships Are Central to Informal Preparation for the Superintendency.....	34
Finding 3: The Most Common Professional Pathway for the Superintendency is Through	

Instructional Leadership.....	37
Chapter 6: The Search and Selection Process.....	40
Finding 1: The Search and Selection Process Had Both Challenges and Opportunities.....	40
Finding 2: The Role of Search Consultants in Constructing the Leadership Profile, Conducting Prescreenings, and Positioning Candidates.....	44
Finding 3: The Impact of the Composition and Politics of the Board on the Search and Selection Process.....	49
Chapter 7: The Resilience Factors That Allow Women of Color to Thrive in Their Role as Superintendent.....	51
Finding 1: Effective Communication, Quick Decision-Making, Knowing When to Seek Assistance, and Valuing Students Are Necessary to Buffer Against Adversity.....	51
Finding 2: Mentors, Sponsors, and Networks Are Necessary Support Systems.....	55
Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion.....	60
Summary of Findings.....	60
Limitations and Future Research.....	67
Implications for Leadership for Equity and Democracy and Policies and Practice.....	68
Summary and Conclusion.....	70
Appendix A: Research Participant Invitation Email.....	76
Appendix B: Individual Interview Protocol.....	77
Appendix C: Notice of Approval For Human Research.....	80

List of Figures

Figure 1. Literature Review Findings

Figure 2. Superintendent Maria Sanchez's Career Map

Figure 3. Superintendent Olga Huezo's Career Map Career Map

Figure 4. Superintendent Harriet Young's Career Map

Figure 5. Superintendent Angela Jones's Career Map

Figure 6. Superintendent Irene Kim's Career Map

Figure 7. Superintendent Christy Manalo's Career Map

Figure 8. Search Firm Consultant Maggie Rodriguez's Career Map

Figure 9. Search Firm Consultant Norma Flores's Career Map

Figure 10. Leadership Profile (Not Associated With Any of the Case Studies)

List of Tables

Table 1. Pilot Study Participant Demographics, Years in the Superintendency, and District Size

Table 2. State Demographics of Student Enrollment in California Schools

Table 3. Participant Demographics, Years in the Superintendency, and District Size

Table 4. Summary of Findings for Research Question 1: What Are the Career Paths Women of Color Take on Their Journey to the Superintendency?

Table 5. Summary of Findings for Research Question 2: How Does a Woman's Specific Racial Ethnic Background Get Reflected in Challenges and Opportunities for the Superintendency?

Table 6. Summary of Findings for Research Question 3: What Skills, Strategies, and Supports Have Contributed to the Success of Women of Color in the Superintendency?

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Chapter 1: Breaking Barriers

“It’s been thought that once industries achieve gender balance, bias will decrease and gender gaps will close. Sometimes known as the ‘add women and stir’ approach, people tend to think that having more women present is all that’s needed to promote change” (Diehl et al., 2022, p. 2). Diehl and colleagues’ quote is relevant for understanding the disproportionate representation of women of color in K–12 leadership. While women make up the majority of the public education workforce writ large, change has not materialized in the highest office of public education, the superintendency, where they remain woefully underrepresented (Harris, 2007; Nash & Grogan, 2021; Sampson et al., 2015). With the continued increase in vacancies in the superintendency role, particularly with the decreasing representation of women in the role since the pandemic (ILO Group, 2022), this study aimed to explore the resilience factors that support and buffer women of color serving as superintendents in hopes of contributing to the knowledge base and promoting further representation in the critical senior-most role in PreK–12 education.

Background

The American Association of School Administrators’ (AASA) 2020 decennial study gathered survey responses from 1,218 respondents representing 45 states to better understand the current landscape of the school superintendency (Tienken et al., 2020). AASA’s longitudinal study revealed that the number of female superintendents grew from 13.1% in 2000 to 24.1% in 2010, and most recently has increased slightly to 26.7% as of 2020. The minimal increase of 2.6% in female superintendents in the past decade, as compared with the 11% increase of female superintendents between 2000 and 2010, suggests the need for further analysis to understand the slow trajectory of growth.

Analysis of the intersectionality of race and gender in AASA’s longitudinal data reveals additional areas of concern. In 2000, only five percent of respondents to AASA’s superintendents’ survey identified themselves as a person of color. Tienken et al. (2020) defined the term *person of color* as “respondents who identified their race/ethnicity as something other than Caucasian” (p. 20). The survey respondents identifying as a person of color grew to only six percent in 2010 and to 8.2% in 2020 (Tienken et al., 2020). Of these 8.2% of superintendents who identified as non-white in 2020, nearly 42% were women, indicating that 12.9% of all female superintendents were women of color (Tienken et al., 2020). While there has been an increase in the percentage of women of color represented in the role of school superintendent, their disproportionate representation remains problematic, particularly in light of larger population trends across the nation (Grogan & Brunner, n.d.; Harris, 2007; Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2021; Tienken et al., 2020). In 2017, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that only 51% of America’s school-age children identify as white (Tienken et al., 2020). In contrast, 80% of the teacher workforce identify as white, and only 3.4% of our nation’s superintendents are women of color (Tienken et al., 2020).

Organizational Structure of the Dissertation

To address the research questions (included later in this chapter), I consulted the extant research literature (see Chapter 2). Chapter 3 describes the methods utilized in this comparative case study design, which examined six female superintendents of color currently leading California public school districts as well as two search firm consultants who were interviewed to obtain further insights on the pathways traveled by women of color hoping to ascend to the

superintendency. Chapter 4 includes the vignettes and career paths of each superintendent interviewed, to illuminate the personal and professional experiences that have helped them to achieve the superintendency. Chapter 5 through 7 reveal the findings of the study, organized in three separate chapters, beginning with Chapter 5's focus on the career pathway, and how the superintendents' journey echoes what is highlighted in the literature. In Chapter 6, I examine the findings on the role of the search firm and, in particular, the search firm consultants, in helping boards of education to find the right fit for their school district. Chapter 7 focuses on findings related to the resilience factors that allow these superintendents to thrive in their role and effect positive change for their community. A discussion of these findings and their implications for policy, practice, and research follows in Chapter 8, which concludes this paper.

Statement of the Problem: Disparities in Representation of Women of Color in the School Superintendency

Blount's (1998) historical work provides for us a better understanding of how the role of the superintendency came to be, and the impact of the history of the role on women today. Blount (1998) noted, "Local and state officials created the domain of school administration, a realm reserved from the beginning for men" (p. 27). With the increase of women in the teaching workforce, the (male) school superintendent position was created to "certify teachers, supervise teacher preparation programs, observe teachers' work, and assess the quality of student recitations" (Blount, 1998, p. 27). As such, from the beginning, and by design, our society and boards of education constructed the superintendency as a masculine-appropriate position meant to supervise over a predominantly female teaching force. This reckoning is critical; Bryk and his colleagues would add that seeing the system is a prerequisite for understanding the results a system produces (Bryk et al., 2015). By the definition of the role, a superintendent was to assert his authority and hold power over others, mostly women. This historical perspective helped frame the need for this study.

Unfortunately, the description of the superintendent position today may still hold much of that same description from over a hundred years ago. In fact, Robinson and colleagues (2017) analyzed the results of the 2015 mid-decade survey published to date and noted the value in comparing and contrasting the findings "to earlier research on women superintendents in the representation of women in the superintendency, career paths, district demographics where women serve, barriers and challenges, reasons for leaving the superintendency, and women's perspectives on leadership" (p. 2). As such, the AASA's mid-decade survey report is important as a foundation for understanding the barriers that exist, systemically and personally, for aspiring female superintendents of color.

The role of serving as a superintendent continues to be challenging, requiring emotional, social, and political capital, including the resilience necessary to support one's personal and professional efficacy (Johnson, B., 2021, Tienken et al., 2020). Despite the challenges, I and scholars are looking for more research on how to support women of color in entering the superintendency, in hopes of addressing their persistent underrepresentation in this change-making role (Nash & Grogan, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017).

While the literature for supporting women into the superintendency has been growing, it should be noted that the literature is still very limited with regard to women of color. Much of the data to date are obtained from white women superintendents, as found in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Capturing the voices of women of color superintendents is

important because of their intersectional experiences, and I am proud to be among the early scholars to contribute to this important area of research.

Beyond capturing the experience of sitting female superintendents of color, there is a need for additional research on how to build stronger pathways for women of color, beginning with access to roles as central office leaders, and their entry into recognized and valued superintendent preparation programs, including doctoral programs. As U.S. classrooms become more diverse, with unique needs, it is critical school districts recruit, hire, and retain diverse candidates for the school superintendency. As Day (2014) found, leading successfully requires more than the ability to bounce back in adverse circumstances, as it requires leaders to have a “hardiness”—a resolute persistence, hope, and commitment.

The superintendency continues to have a huge impact on the vibrancy of America’s public schools (Nash & Grogran, 2021). Additionally, the recruitment, hiring, and retention of the school superintendent remains one of the most important tasks of school boards. With the increasing diversity seen in U.S. classrooms, and the increasing number of qualified and talented women of color completing superintendent preparation programs and holding a leadership role in the central office, there is no excuse for the lack of diversity in the school superintendency, both in gender and in race/ethnicity. Having diverse representation at the highest helm of public education can only benefit U.S. students and, ultimately, improve U.S. schools. This imperative directly contributed to the design of this study and the selection of my research questions.

Research Questions

My research questions serve as a framework for my research study design and data analysis procedures. These questions are:

1. What are the career paths women of color take on their journey to the superintendency?
2. How does a woman’s specific racial ethnic background get reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency?
3. What skills, strategies, and supports have contributed to the success of women of color in the superintendency?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

My research is grounded in two conceptual frameworks: intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins et al., 2021; Chun et al., 2013; Few-Demo, 2014) and gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947; Tallerico, 2000). Crenshaw (1989) is recognized as one of the first to make a case for intersectionality as a theoretical framework (Cho et al., 2013; Few-Demo, 2014; Johnson, N.N., 2021). Through Crenshaw's (1989) pivotal work, the examination of race and gender shows up in structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) and Few-Demo (2014) defined *structural intersectionality* as the connectedness of systems and structures in society and their impact on individuals and groups. Examples of issues related to structural intersectionality in the literature on women superintendents touch on the unpaid labor such women are expected to do (Bernal et al., 2017; Diehl et al., 2022), the common pathways for their ascension to the role (Robinson et al., 2017), and the lack of culturally responsive mentoring available (Muñoz et al., 2014; Ott, 2019). *Political intersectionality* is defined as traditional feminist and antiracist politics and their effects on the marginalization of ethnic minority women (Crenshaw, 1989; Few-Demo, 2014). In the context of this study, these expectations necessitate that women of color navigate the gendered and racialized politics of the job both before and during their service as superintendents. Finally, *representational intersectionality* includes how the cultural construction of racial/ethnic minoritized women influences the framing and priorities of political agendas (Crenshaw, 1989; Few-Demo, 2014). Connecting intersectionality to the existing research literature documenting the experiences of women of color in, or aspiring to, the role of the superintendency reveals ways in which—structurally, politically, and representationally—boards, search firms, and society uphold biases, expectations, and structures that hurt women of color (Tallerico, 2000; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Sharp et al., 2000).

Gatekeeping theory, “as developed by Lewin (1947) and amplified by Shoemaker (1991), provides the principal conceptual framework...as a “theory of channels and gate keepers” to accessing the superintendency...involving the passage of applicants through a variety of channels” (Tallerico, 2000, p. 19). Today's process for selecting, hiring, and retaining superintendents requires jumping through a variety of channels, or gatekeepers. Such gatekeepers include the hired search firm and their assigned consultants or headhunters, for the hiring of a superintendent vacancy. Additionally, these search firms or headhunters often have early control of recruitment of applicants, paper screening of their supplied materials, and follow-up conversations and referrals to the school board for an interview. Tallerico (2000) further explained gatekeeping theory as it applies to this research:

Taken together, the demographics of key gatekeepers (i.e., mostly non-minority male); what we know about human similarity-attractiveness (i.e., the propensity to connect with those most like ourselves); and the predominance of gut feelings, chemistry, and intuition in critical interview interactions (i.e., factors that foster the introduction of subconscious bias) combine to favor male rather than female and majority rather than minority superintendent applicants. Essentially, this combination of factors presents females and people of color with more gates in the flow channels leading to the superintendency than those facing White males. (p. 37)

Through these two conceptual frameworks, this chapter investigates the risk and resilience factors for women of color superintendents, with particular focus on African American women, Latinas, and Asian American women, who represent the superintendent participants interviewed in this study. To be inclusive of both risks and resilience factors, in this literature review I first analyze persistent barriers before moving on to an exploration of resilience factors that may buffer women of color as superintendents.

Systemic Underrepresentation of Women of Color in the Superintendency

This study built upon existing literature exploring the barriers that inhibit women of color from successfully obtaining a superintendent position. As described in the literature, these barriers include three themes: societal perception and biases toward the role of the superintendent; relationships with school boards and search firms; and the lack of career paths for women of color aspiring to serve as superintendents.

Societal Biases

One of the greatest barriers for women of color successfully obtaining and serving as a school superintendent is society's bias and preconceived notions (Bernal et al., 2017; Shakeshaft, 1989; Sharp et al., 2000). As discussed, the history of the superintendency reveals great bias. It is a position created specifically for white men and which continues to favor them (Blount, 1998; Finnan et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2017). This history can be traced to both the racial gap and gender gap in the superintendency today. For this reason, my research focused intentionally on individuals at the intersection of both gender and race, and the double bind this intersectional identity creates for women of color. In alignment with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory, reinforced by Few-Demo (2014), women of color are impacted by structural intersectionality because of U.S. society's biases and expectations about the demographics of a school superintendent. These biases are so ingrained that scholars have referred to the phenomenon as the very structure of U.S. society and argued that it contributes to the root cause of inequities (Estler, 1975; Schmuck, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1989).

One example of how structural biases present a double bind for women of color is the perceived communication deficits in the determination of individuals' leadership capacity. Diehl and colleagues' (2022) study of women leaders noted that women experience hyper-awareness of their communication style, which may soften their communication when expressing their authority and accomplishments in ways that are detrimental to their career objectives. Additionally, the social expectations for women to serve as nurturers add to the bias and gender inequities in the workplace (Diehl et al., 2022). Biases in perceived communication deficits also affect individuals of color. Shawn Joseph, a former Black male superintendent now serving as an assistant professor at Howard University, recalled being told his communication style as both an aspiring and sitting superintendent was threatening to others (Joseph, 2023). For women of color, who exist at the intersection of gender and racial marginalization, these biases around communication style in comparison to a hegemonic "norm" are experienced as a double bind. In their aptly named article "Race Matters for Women Leaders: Intersectional Effects on Agentic Deficiencies and Penalties," Rosette et al. (2016) reflected on the ways in which communication by women of color can cast them differently, including as likable, leader-like, or effective, and the resulting impact of this categorization on their chances of being offered certain leadership positions. The existence of these pervasive biases normalize the gatekeeping systems that exist during leadership searches, including in the search process for superintendents. As a result, many

qualified women of color are discouraged from applying because of these white-cis-male-centric values and biases. When districts rely solely on school boards and search firms to refer qualified candidates without attending to these biases, they risk operationalizing bias into their formal selection criteria.

Role and Relationship With School Boards and Search Firms

Gatekeeping, as related to access to the superintendency, refers to the superintendent hiring and selection process, a series of particular channels or passage points that applicants must go through, which may have different starting and end points (Tallerico, 2000). Eventually, however, the points converge to a final destination whereby an appointment is made to the position of superintendent. Lewin's (1947) gatekeeping theory, applied to the superintendency by Tallerico (2000), is underscored when reviewing the research regarding school boards and search firms.

The relationship between the superintendent and the school board has been studied and debated because of the tension and power dynamic between the elected officials (the school board members) and the appointed administrator (the superintendent) (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). This relationship has become more difficult and complex because of community issues, such as politics, race, health access, food access, housing, and poverty. Superintendents often find themselves "discerning how political power is divided with a community and how they might work effectively with all groups" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 159). Unfortunately, superintendents and boards contribute to the dysfunction when one or more struggle with being in charge versus mobilizing support for a coherent reform plan (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Dervarics and O'Brien's (2019) work established the eight characteristics of effective school boards. One of their study's interviewed board members said, "Boards held the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress but did not engage in the daily administration of schools" (p. 7). Another board member explained, "I am not a professional educator. . . . [The superintendent and her staff] are the professionals, and we say to them, 'These are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it'" (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019, p. 7). School boards should ideally focus on policies, yet in reality often function more like a group of politicians meddling with administrative decisions based upon the narrow interests of their supporting political factions (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Despite their public charge, in actuality many board members overstep their policymaking roles by acting as political delegates, creating and shaping policy and intruding on administrative decisions (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

During a hiring process for a vacant superintendent position, relationships and power dynamics among board members may become more tense. With the increasing need to backfill for a mass exodus of superintendents through retirement, and a dearth in qualified and diverse superintendent applicants, more school boards are hiring search firms/consultants to support their hiring process for the superintendency (Kamler, 2009; Tallerico, 2000). It should be noted that search firm consultants are usually retired superintendents, and so by default are mostly men (Tallerico, 2000). Thus, search consultants are even more critical, as they not only ensure qualified and competent superintendent candidates exist, but they also serve as gatekeepers for diversity—in this case, for women of color (Kamler, 2009; Sharp et al., 2000; Tallerico, 2000). Additionally, in Sharp et al.'s 2000 study of three states' female superintendents, where 118 of the 212 female superintendents (55.7%) responded, the respondents stated that the search consultant(s) used to hire them were comprised of 40% all men, 8% all women, and 44% both men and women (Sharp et al., 2000). This overrepresentation of men is especially significant

given consultants may personally influence the recruitment of applicants, the early paper-screening gates, and the report to the board during the hiring process (Tallerico, 2000). One search consultant in Kamler's 2005 study shared, "I'd say at least in ten or more searches I have done, more than half of the candidates have been recruited [outreach]" (p. 129).

School boards serve as an important governing body for a community and its school district because they "are expected to be public trustees who should make objective policy decisions in the best interest of their entire communities" (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 159). Given their influence and positional power, along with search consultants, boards must intentionally commit to shaping the diversity of the superintendent applicant pool through the removal of any "gates" that may prevent a diverse pool (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Boards ought to undergo mandatory anti-racist and implicit bias training, and consultants and boards should invest in mentoring and advocacy for women of color in central office positions to increase the likelihood they are prepared and apply for the superintendency (Kamler, 2009). Additionally, normalizing non-male career paths toward the superintendency, such as elementary school leadership and leadership in the areas of curriculum and instruction, supports more women of color in successfully entering the superintendency (Tallerico, 2000). Finally, because consultants and boards still represent mostly non-minoritized males, boards and consultants need to remove the gates of "going with the gut" and "looking for the right fit" and, instead, stick with the objective metrics agreed upon by the board, as a measure for quality candidates (Tallerico, 2000). This includes scanning the myriad of important instructional leadership roles often held by women of color for aspiring candidates, a focus I turn to next.

Differential Career Path

Numerous studies show women enter the superintendency later in their career than men because of the number of years they spend in the classroom and in middle management (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Rennie Center, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2000). Additionally, the average age women first become superintendent is 47, whereas men tend to become a superintendent at a younger average age of 43 (Robinson et al., 2017). Women are more likely than men to be hired as superintendent in the district they work (54% versus 41%), which indicates that boards prefer to hire a man they do not know versus a woman they do not know (Robinson et al., 2017).

The career path for men tends to be teacher, high school principal, then superintendent (Rennie Center, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017). The career path for women tends to be teacher, elementary principal, central office administrator, and then superintendent (Rennie Center, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017). In all, more superintendents come through the pathway of a high school principalship, a position men tend to dominate, whereas women are much more prevalent as principals at the elementary school level (Rennie Center, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017). One female respondent in the Rennie Center's 2021 study remarked, "Males are jumping from principals to superintendent and I would never have thought to do that. A lot of males move through the system so fast without fully understanding the teaching and learning part" (p. 10). In addition to women having extensive professional experiences, Bernal and her colleagues (2017) wrote about the additional layer of complexities added to a women's career path. Women often consider life factors their male counterparts may not, including domestic responsibilities and lifestyle preferences that support a balance of juggling personal responsibilities against professional obligations (Bernal et al., 2017). Notably, when analyzing the qualifications as defined by education, credentialing, and experience, women superintendents outqualify male

superintendents (Rennie Center, 2021). All of these attributes should make women more attractive as candidates, given their higher qualifications and increased years of experience, but this does not bear out in practice, indicating a lack of a career path and planning in place to support and recruit women of color to the superintendency. Even more alarming is the report by Gullo and Sperandio (2020), which found that male assistant superintendents were 1.3 times more likely than their female counterparts to express an interest in the superintendency. This is concerning given the implication on the continued gender gap in district leadership. As long as more men than women express their willingness to pursue the superintendency, societal beliefs that only men can serve as superintendents effectively will self-perpetuate, and will effectively deny districts and communities the benefit of often more qualified candidates. Countering this requires sustained attention to societal biases and the ways they are often operationalized in organizations through the use of gatekeeping entities (school boards and search firms) and “expected” career trajectories to the superintendency. To understand efforts to sustain this attention, I turn to an examination of support structures for aspiring women of color superintendents.

Risk and Resilience Factors for Women of Color as Superintendents

Seeing the system is an important prerequisite to change (Bryk et al., 2015), yet not sufficient for imagining true transformation. As such, the second domain of this literature review includes the support needed for women of color aspiring to serve as superintendent. These supports include three themes: prioritizing mentoring pipelines with a focus on women of color, the intentional recruitment of more women of color for superintendent preparation programs and central office positions, and the need for school districts and state educational agencies to set clear and public goals for gender and racial equity in the executive offices of PreK–12 school systems.

Mentoring/Sponsorships

Enomoto et al. (2000), Kamler (2006), and Searby and Tripses (2006) all used Homer’s tale of the adventures of Odysseus to illustrate the value of a mentor. The Greek goddess of wisdom, Athene, is responsible for mentoring the young Telemachus while his father Odysseus is away, often intervening during critical moments, and often in disguise (Kamler, 2006; Searby & Tripses, 2006). Enomoto and colleagues (2000) likened the narrative of Athene to the wise mentors of today, often also acting in disguise.

There is no denying the power of mentorship. In part, the disproportionately low representation of women of color in the superintendent role stems from the lack of mentoring and networking available to women. Access to mentoring is more available to white, cisgender males because of the mostly white male membership of organizations and associations in education (Searby & Tripses, 2006; Muñoz et al., 2014; Enomoto et al., 2000). This reality has resulted in mostly white male membership associations mentoring and sponsoring other white males, creating a privileged and exclusive network (Kamler, 2006; Searby & Tripses, 2006).

Mentoring also serves as a “personal learning partnership between a more experienced professional who acts as a guide, supporter, role model, coach, teacher, and/or sponsor and a less experienced professional” (Searby & Tripses, 2006, p. 32). Specifically, mentoring provides support, motivation, inspiration, and career advice that can advance the careers of women and further build their confidence to enter the highest office in PreK–12 education (Enomoto et al., 2000; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Searby & Tripses, 2006).

It is true that access to mentors, particularly women of color practicing as superintendents, is limited (Grogan, 2003; Kamler, 2006; Muñoz et al., 2014). While there remain few women of color mentors available for aspiring women superintendents, specific career planning and pathways may also mitigate barriers (Holmes & Parker, 2017; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Robinson et al., 2017). Thus, women must be actively pursued and coached to enter administration earlier in their career to support the pipeline toward the superintendency. To further mitigate the limited availability of practicing female superintendents of color to serve as mentors, aspiring women of color should actively seek membership with women's organizations to support their growth, networks, and sense of belonging (Muñoz et al., 2014; Searby & Tripses, 2006). Through these connections, women of color may discover new ways of looking at a problem, benefit each other through the sharing of their successes and failures, serve as resources for one another, provide professional contacts to each other, and be exposed to other dynamic women educators in different agencies, gaining multiple developmental relationships (Muñoz et al., 2014; Searby & Tripses, 2006).

The research also reveals that women of color protégés must proactively seek mentors who are willing to serve, and not just rely on those formal structures of pairing through associations (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Searby & Tripses, 2006). Finally, mentoring provides women of color necessary supports in the areas that might be most difficult for superintendents: political savviness, accessing networks, connecting with additional mentors with similar positionality, connecting with mentors with different positionality, and access to more than one mentor (Enomoto et al., 2000). While mentoring can be a career-long support for women of color, a unique support role exists in the intensive, time-bound participation of superintendent preparation programs that predates many candidates' applications to the superintendency.

Superintendent Preparation Programs

With the unique requirements for superintendents across the United States, and given that there is no common superintendent preparation licensing nationwide, most doctoral programs in educational administration are considered preparation programs for superintendents (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). However, it is challenging to create a highly relevant superintendent preparation program/doctoral program, because of the variation in needs from one community to the next. Grogan and Andrews (2002) further elaborated:

It is difficult to develop a comprehensive superintendent preparation program because to a greater extent than the principalship, the position of superintendent varies considerably. The role depends on the size and location of the district, relevant state laws governing composition of school boards, scope of board and superintendent responsibilities, local fiscal responsibility and autonomy, and the nature of public meetings.” (p. 246)

Given the variation in needs and desired characteristics of school superintendents from local communities, themes specific to equity, diversity, and inclusion become even more critical for all superintendent preparation programs to prioritize. To do this effectively, there is a great urgency for preparation programs to invest in intentional and targeted recruitment, focused on women and people of color, in order to advocate for equity and social justice by including voices too often left out of critical conversations on leadership (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Holmes & Parker, 2017). In addition to benefiting the preparation for all doctoral students, this conscious

effort to increase doctoral programs' diversity will likely increase the diverse pool of qualified superintendent candidates for open vacancies. This pipeline will also increase the exposure of women and people of color to superintendent search firms and consultants, a huge gatekeeper in the hiring process (Rennie Center, 2021). Additionally, the odds of doctorate degree holders becoming superintendents are twice as high as for individuals who do not hold doctorate degrees, thus making an even stronger case for recruiting more women of color to university programs offering doctorate degrees in educational leadership (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

As shared above, boards and search firms hold biases, perpetuating systemic oppression and leadership bias (Rennie Center, 2021; Davis & Bowers, 2019; Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Thus, it is critical that university programs redesign their course of study to include activities specific to the pathway to the superintendency (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Holmes & Parker, 2017; Rennie Center, 2021; Tripses et al., 2013). These activities include more real-world applications, such as engaging students in mock interviews by school board associations and search firms (Holmes & Parker, 2017; Tripses et al., 2013). Additionally, taking students through the application process and examining different superintendent contracts is important (Holmes & Parker, 2017). Finally, studying case studies via live recordings of superintendent searches, and participating in culminating activities that include interviews, public presentations, and closed board sessions, can support aspiring students to successfully obtain and remain in the superintendency.

These programs should also include among their teaching faculty and guest speakers individuals that are seen as “credible” among their students, including current and former superintendents (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Holmes & Parker, 2017). The opportunity to participate in paid rigorous and meaningful internships, which include potential exposure to more networking and mentorships, is also desirable (Tripses et al., 2013). Also, because graduates of programs are more likely to obtain their first assignment as superintendent within one year of graduation, a rate that drops off each year thereafter, the redesign of the course of study and activities must also be timed such that the most critical experiences, such as mock interviews and engagement with search firms, occur in the last year of the program (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Holmes & Parker, 2017). Finally, given the importance of supporting women of color in the role of superintendent, there must be ongoing follow-through with program graduates to ensure a successful matriculation from university preparation programs (Holmes & Parker, 2017). Like search firms and school boards, preparation programs can play an important role in increasing the representation of women of color in the superintendency. To institutionalize these practices, districts can and should set public policy specific to gender and racial equity.

Public Policies for Gender and Racial Equity

Setting clear, public policies for greater gender and racial equity is recommended so that school district boards are held accountable for diversifying their top post, which will have ripple effects on the entire system's workforce (ILO Group, 2022). In addition to setting public policy, local and state policy makers must commit resources for diversity, equity, and inclusion training for system leaders and boards, and local policies must be in place for similar training requirements for critical district consultants, including search firms (Kamler, 2009; Rennie Center, 2021; Tallerico, 2000). Public policies and investment of resources support transparent leadership actions when regularly shared and reported to the public during school board meetings and in other public forums. Similarly, tying superintendent performance evaluation and pay to

setting and meeting diversity goals will ensure the superintendent and top-level executives hire a diverse pool of candidates, building that necessary pipeline toward gender and racial equity (Rennie Center, 2021). These specific actions can lead to a more transparent, inclusive, and equitable system of support to encourage and sustain women of color in leadership roles. Additionally, all of this can be organized in a strategic equity plan, which would lay the foundation for business and academic decisions. Finally, boards and school districts should advocate for regular and ongoing equity audits of hiring and promotional practices, with the intention to study and improve based upon the findings of said audits (Rennie Center, 2021). Skrla and her colleagues (2009) suggested the following method for conducting an equity audit:

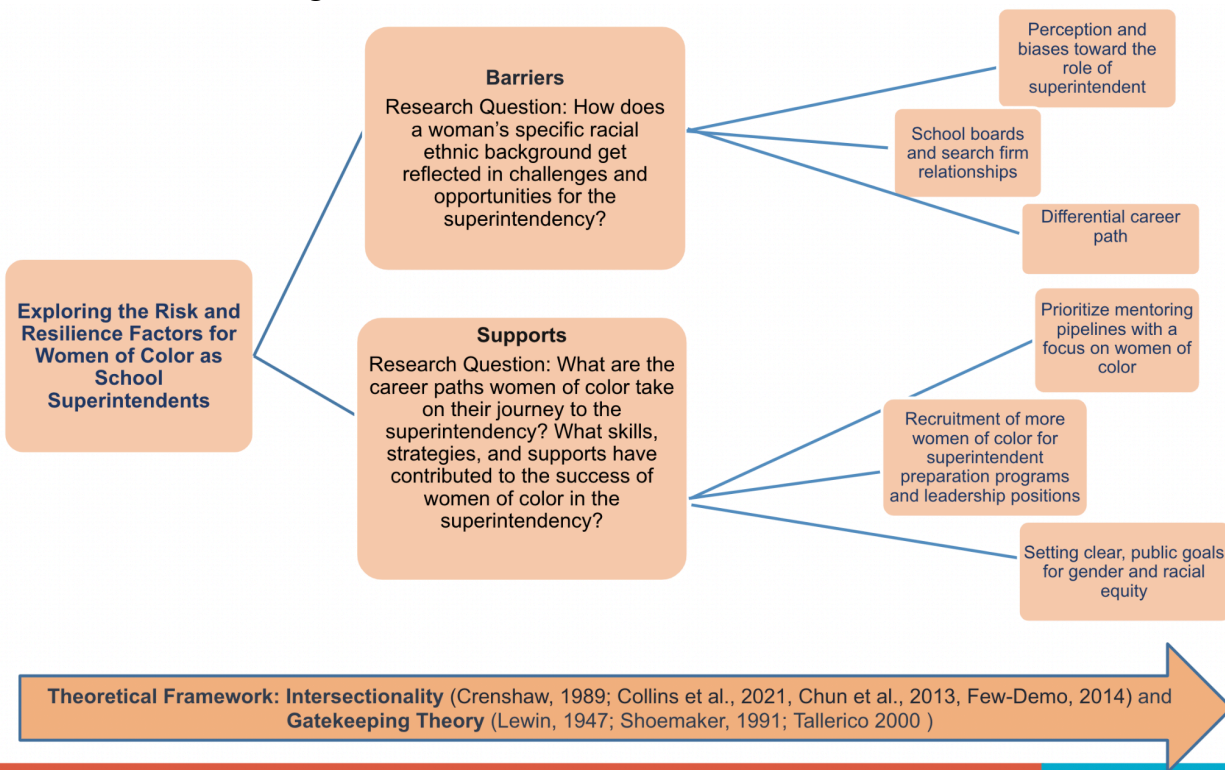
- 1) Create a committee of relevant stakeholders, 2) present the data to the committee and have everyone graph the data, 3) discuss the meaning of data; possibly use experts or a facilitator, 4) discuss the potential solutions, again possibly with outside assistance, 5) implement solution(s), 6) monitor and evaluate results, and 7) celebrate if successful; if not successful, return to step 3 and repeat the process. (p. 26–27)

Examining the language of job expectations can help align hiring decisions to public diversity goals. For example, since women tend to have a more collaborative and inclusive leadership style, leadership expectations that replace competition and reward cooperation create win–wins for both employees and the organization (Diehl et al., 2022; Sharp et al., 2000). Dominant, competitive leadership styles tend to lead people toward zero-sum thinking, the notion that someone must lose in order for there to be gains (Diehl et al., 2022). Competition fosters individual effort versus collegiality and teamwork, and as such, boards would be wise to move away from competition and toward collaboration, creating healthier workplaces.

Other actions that may support gender and racial equity goals include measuring success through policy versus through physical presence and time spent to achieve success (Diehl et al., 2022). The outdated thinking that long hours spent in the office equals competency and commitment to the organization hurts women and other marginalized identities by dishonoring their desire to remain committed and present as a parent, partner, and valued family member. Instead, giving employees, including superintendents, the freedom to meet goals through specific measurements of success allows them to achieve these goals creatively without the constraints of archaic and outdated expectations of spending long hours in the office (Diehl et al., 2022). Together, these public policies may provide the support needed for a greater representation of women of color aspiring to the superintendency.

Figure 1 summarizes what the literature reveals as barriers and supports for women of color in the superintendency. To contribute to this knowledge base, my research further explores the career paths of the women of color sitting in the superintendency; the skills, strategies, and supports that have contributed to their success; and the ways their race and gender show up in the challenges and opportunities in the role of the superintendency. The next chapter delves into the design and methodology of the study.

Figure 1
Literature Review Findings



Chapter 3: Methodology

This comparative case study design is aimed at studying the real-life, contemporary context of the experiences of multiple women of color in the superintendency, within a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My rationale for selecting a comparative case study design was to illustrate the lived experiences of women of color superintendents. Additionally, my research methodology was inspired by a pilot study I conducted in 2022. This chapter describes that pilot study and its influence on my research questions, site and sample selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Preparing for the Study: A Pilot Study

As I reflect on a pilot study I conducted in 2022, I was excited, inspired, and eager to move forth with my dissertation data collection and analysis phase. I interviewed two leaders, one who at the time served as deputy superintendent in a very large and urban school district, and is now the interim superintendent in the same district, of more than 70,000 students. The other leader, a recently retired superintendent, served in a medium-size suburban school district of over 15,000 students. I selected these leaders using a stratified purposeful sampling technique, where both were selected because of their gender, race, and lived experiences. Their demographic information is outlined in Table 1. With both of the leaders' permission, I recorded their interviews and transcribed their interviews. I also studied published websites of their school districts, including their resumes, and watched a few of the board meetings they led.

I asked the following two questions of the pilot study participants: What major challenges have you encountered as a female leader of color on your career path [to the superintendency]? How have you overcome these challenges? My hope in asking these questions was to honor the resilience of women in the role of superintendency, despite the systemic challenges of gatekeepers, societal barriers, and personal obligations.

One of my participants, Mary Hanson (pseudonym), who served as the deputy superintendent at the time of my pilot study, shared an experience she had with a school board member regarding his bias. She shared the following:

I was with one of our board members one time. . . . He was just hitting us question after question. He was just going at it. And I wasn't saying anything. Because I was processing it all. And all of a sudden, he looked at me, and he just said, "Why aren't you saying anything?" He also said, "What do you think about that?" Like real rough in that way, right? And so my superintendent, out of the goodness of his heart, you know, jumped in and answered for me. And he [the board member] said, "Why did you rescue her?" (Pilot Study Interview, M.H., 2022).

Mary Hanson was appalled at this board member's assumptions and expressed her disappointment about how her interaction with this board member demonstrated the societal bias toward AAPI women, especially in the workplace.

Table 1
Pilot Study Participant Demographics, Years in the Superintendency, and District Size

Pseudonym	Position	Highest Education Level	Years in Superintendency	District Pseudonym	District Size	Race
Mary Hanson	Deputy Superintendent	MA	4	A	70,000	Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)
Kristen Johnson	Recently Retired Superintendent	EdD	4	B	15,000	Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)

The pilot study is an example of what this dissertation study hopes to reveal: the assumptions of many toward female leaders of color because of their adoption of the prescribed gender and racial norms society has placed on women of color. In this case, a white male board member assumed Mary needed “rescuing” and insulted her, when she was actually trying to process his questions and provide a thoughtful response. My aim with this study was to allow personal stories, personal journeys, and experiences such as these to help illuminate the experiences of women of color leaders. The following chapters reveal the findings of this study, which indeed help identify the resilient factors that can buffer against such bias and prejudices. Additionally, the pilot study helped me to refine my research questions, focusing on career paths, the impact of a woman’s specific racial and ethnic background and how it shows up as challenges and opportunities for the superintendency, and the skills, strategies, and support that help women of color in the superintendency.

Research Design

My study included interviews of six female superintendents as well as two search firm consultants, in order to uncover different perspectives on the challenges and resilience factors for women of color pursuing the role of school superintendency. I used a bounded system, focusing the study on women representing three social categories of Black, Latina, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), and who are currently serving in the role of superintendency, as well as two search firm consultants currently engaged in conducting searches for school districts. I interviewed only superintendents and search firm consultants living in the state of California. In particular, I was curious to hear about the resilience factors they have experienced in their respective roles. I also reviewed the documents of the superintendent job postings as publicized by the search firms. My intent was to collect data to support the study’s three research questions:

1. What are the career paths women of color take on their journey to superintendency?
2. How does a woman’s specific racial ethnic background get reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency?
3. What skills, strategies, and supports have contributed to the success of women of color in the superintendency?

Mills and Gay (2019) described *purposive sampling* as a “judgment sampling, the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population” (p. 159). Using this definition, I selected sites, or school districts, that are led by a woman of color as a superintendent. I selected sites from only California, both because of my geographical location and because of my own network of contacts, which is predominantly in California. Despite my history in Northern California specifically, because of the relatively few superintendents and consultants available that represent my sampling, I expanded my sampling location to all of California to ensure I met the minimum number of informants I wished to interview. In the 2020 Decennial Study led by the American Association of School Administrators (Tienken et al., 2020), the demographic responses from 1,218 superintendents representing 45 states demonstrated that superintendents of color serve across multiple geographies, in contrast to the common belief that superintendents of color primarily serve urban school districts with high minority populations (Nash & Grogan, 2021). In alignment with the current research, my informants represented urban, suburban, and rural sites, and varied from serving smaller school districts (5,000+ student body population) to large school districts (40,000+ student body population).

Participants

Mills and Gay (2019) described the purposive sampling approach of criterion sampling as the “strategy of identifying participants who meet the defined criterion; select groups of five or so participants to collect data from” (p. 160). My purposive sampling strategy was inspired by the research of Rosette et al. (2016), which focused on the intersection of race and gender and the effects of prescribed stereotypes on how a woman of color is impacted with regard to her agentic competency or deficiency, and whether women of color are agentially penalized. Similar to Rosette et al. (2016), I interviewed two Black female superintendents, two Latina superintendents, and two AAPI female superintendents because these are the three main racial categories of students, outside of white, that show up in California schools (CDE, CA School Dashboard, 2024). Hispanic students represent 56.1% of California’s school student population, with Asian students at 9.5% and African American at 4.7%, as shown in Table 2.

In addition to the six superintendents’ participation, I also obtained the participation of two current search consultants, serving as search firm consultants for one of California’s largest superintendent search firms. Their participation adds a different perspective, as well as depth, to both my data gathered and the analysis of the data. In addition, having the search consultants’ perspective allowed me to illuminate how the intersectionality of race and gender shows up in the educational system through the selection process for superintendents.

Table 2
State Demographics of Student Enrollment in California Schools

Race/Ethnicity	Total	Percentage
African American	273,148	4.7%
American Indian	26,108	0.4%
Asian	557,190	9.5%
Filipino	127,735	2.2%
Hispanic	3,284,788	56.1%
Two or More Races	252,400	4.3%
Pacific Islander	23,847	0.4%
White	1,175,911	20.1%

Note. Data from “CA School Dashboard” by California Department of Education, 2024.

Through my networks and through a Google search and introductory email, I connected with these women and asked them if they would participate in my study. All six superintendents replied positively, and agreed to participate in my research study. Regarding the search consultants, I initially contacted six search consultants and only one responded affirmatively. After I connected with this search consultant, she then referred me to her colleague, which resulted in the total of two participants as search consultants for my study.

Upon receipt of a positive response from each participant after my introductory email (Appendix A), I reached out to each superintendent’s administrative assistant to schedule a video conference with me to conduct the interviews. Each participant also received and completed the informed consent form, and I proceeded with a semi-structured interview protocol during my interviews with the participants.

Additionally, to obtain a more comprehensive perspective of the search process, I interviewed two search firm consultants from one of our largest search firms in California. To protect the informants’ identities, I do not list their names and sites. Instead, Table 2 includes their pseudonym, basic district demographics and district pseudonym, and ethnoracial identity.

Table 3
Participant Demographics, Years in the Superintendency, and District Size

Pseudonym	Position	Highest Education Level	Years in Superintendency	District Pseudonym	District Size	Race
Maria Sanchez	Superintendent	MA	2	Fredericksburg School District	12,000	Latina
Olga Huevo	Superintendent	MA	9	Dripping Springs School District	25,000	Latina
Harriet Young	Interim superintendent during interview, named superintendent shortly after interview	MA	1	Abilene School District	40,000	Black
Angela Jones	Superintendent	EdD	7	Boerne School District	50,000	Black
Irene Kim	Superintendent	EdD	7	Alpine School District	35,000	AAPI
Christy Manalo	Superintendent	EdD	6	Gray Fox School District	5,000	AAPI
Maggie Rodriguez	Search Consultant	EdD	14	N/A	N/A	Latina
Norma Flores	Search Consultant	EdD	14	N/A	N/A	Latina

Data Collection Process

I gathered data via semi-structured interviews so that I could hear from the participants about their experiences, but also so that I could probe deeper when a response prompted me to do so. In addition, through Spradley's (1979) work on interviewing techniques and rapport, I created a semi-structured interview protocol that consisted of descriptive, structural, and contrast questions, as seen in Appendix C. The lived experiences these women provided for me served as the main data set for this study. Their stories of triumphs and tribulation, of successes and setbacks, and most importantly, of perseverance and resilience help me to elevate their career pathways and the challenges and supports available to those wishing to pursue the superintendency.

Prior to the interviews, I obtained written consent from participants via email, followed by verbal consent during our video conference. During the interviews, I asked informants if I had consent to record their interviews, as well as to take scripted notes. When responses were unclear or warranted me to ask for more details, I engaged in natural probing for depth and additional information. Through the probing process, I was able to prompt the participants to reflect on why they chose to do what they did or on the impact of their decisions, which provided for me greater

depth in their lived experiences. I opened all my interviews by asking participants to reflect on their career paths up to their current position, encouraging them to elaborate on momentous occasions or persons who helped them along the way. I also asked them to reflect on the professional development or support systems that helped them to thrive in their roles, both currently as a superintendent and in their previous roles. Themes, which are described further in the following chapters, include the background and experience of the superintendent, their perspective given their experiences of their organization, their training and career path toward the superintendency, the support system and professional development most useful to them as a superintendent, and the policies and practices they believe would eliminate barriers for women of color aspiring to serve as superintendents. Finally, I kept a journal of my own reflections during and immediately after the interview, to help me recall the rich data as well as to check my bias given my positionality.

From my previous experience with the pilot study, I learned that despite the demands of their position, the superintendents willingly and selflessly gave anywhere from one hour to upward of two and a half hours of their time to talk with me about their career. The same was true for my research study participants. All of the participants were eager to share their lived experiences and openly shared their professional life story, often telling me their chronological story from young adulthood to their current professional existence as a superintendent. They were forthcoming, and several showed great vulnerability, as some participants teared up while reliving their professional and life experiences.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) have explained that qualitative data analysis involves a “data analysis spiral” (p. 185), which includes the “process of data collection, data analysis and report writing, which are not distinct steps in the process—they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project” (p. 185). The data analysis spiral includes “managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 187). Each data analysis activity has corresponding analytic strategies with corresponding analytic outcomes. For example, the activity of reading and memoing emergent ideas requires the researcher to take notes, sketch reflective thinking, or summarize field notes with an intended outcome of leading to code development and reflections over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

First, I created an organizational system in my Google Drive, to support the multitude of data I planned on collecting as part of my research. This includes folders with the pseudonym of the superintendents I interviewed. In each folder, I created a sub folder containing the documents I analyzed, including the job posting for each superintendent role, resumes, and relevant board minutes and agendas. I used these documents as additional data points to augment or check my primary data sources, which are the interviews with the superintendents.

I also created a different sub folder to hold the transcript of each interview I conducted. Because each participant gave me permission to record their interview, I was able to transcribe their voice recording with Otter.AI, a transcription program. Once I had the completed transcriptions from Otter.AI, I uploaded these transcripts onto MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis program, using the same pseudonyms assigned in my organizational Google Drive. I also read the transcripts at least twice, and listened to the audio recording as I read, for context, including listening to the inflection in the participant’s voice and capturing the natural emotions

of the participants as they shared their stories. This also allowed me to document my reflections in memos for each transcript.

Because I am studying the career paths of women of color as school superintendents, I used both inductive and deductive coding processes. First, I chose to code my data in accordance with one of two methods as shared by Miles and Huberman (cited in Basit, 2003). This method included me creating a provisional starting list of family codes, or categories, derived from my research questions related to the risk and resilience of women of color serving in the role of superintendency. Basit (2003) also cited Strauss and Corbin in their review of creating categories as a means of organizing data, noting that “category names can come from the pool of concepts that researchers already have from their disciplinary and professional reading, or borrowed from the technical literature, or are the words and phrases used by informants themselves” (p. 144).

However, as is the case with qualitative research, as I started to code my datasets, emerging themes arose that I did not expect to see when I started with the deductive process. Through both the deductive and inductive processes, I arrived at parent codes: *career paths*, *the search*, and *resilient factors*. I also created child codes under each parent code, including *formal preparation*, *informal preparation*, and *roles held* under the parent code *career paths*. In addition, I created the child codes *challenges and opportunities*, *role of search consultants* and *the board* under the parent code *the search*. Finally, I created the child codes *leadership skills and values* and *support systems* under the parent code *resilient factors*. These codes helped me to analyze my data and categorize them into themes. Again, as is the case with qualitative research, I engaged in a natural back and forth between my codes and datasets, until I was able to establish a comprehensive set of themes. This inductive–deductive process allowed me to use my own reasoning skills throughout my analysis. Finally, the themes were strengthened through a triangulation process against the existing literature, my memos, and documents retrieved from the internet.

First, I read and analyzed each transcript, looking for quotes that fit into each of the parent codes and child codes. Then, using MAXQDA software, I matched selected segments of each transcript to the parent codes or child codes, as organized in the software. As I continued this process of coding my transcripts, looking for themes and data that would support my main research questions, I also recognized that coding involved my continued re-examination of the codes against the data, and I revised or expanded on the codes as needed. To quote Basit (2003), “This clearly illustrated that coding involved not just premeditation, but reflexive and reflective activity” (p. 149). In addition to coding, I followed the advice of Maxwell (2013), and created a visual representation of each superintendent’s career path along with their vignettes, to better portray their career trajectory and lived experiences, including their mobility, personal and/or professional mentors, and the professional positions they held that led to their roles as superintendent. Their individual vignettes and career maps will be highlighted in Chapter 4, prior to my revelation of the findings of the study.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include generalization due to purposive sampling and researcher bias. Maxwell (2013) described that *generalization*, “in research, refers to extending research results, conclusions, or other accounts that are based on a study of particular individuals, settings, times, or institutions to other individuals, settings, times or institutions than those directly studied” (p. 136). Thus, this study is limited to the generalization of the findings, and should not be applied toward the larger population of school superintendents nor toward all

women of color serving as school superintendents. This is because this study was limited to six women superintendents from three social categories defined as Black, Latina, and AAPI. All the participating superintendents also serve public school districts, with varying size districts ranging from 5,000 to 70,000 students, all in the state of California. As such, this study did not capture other types of school systems, including private and charter. Additionally, not all racial and ethnic categories are captured in this study.

A second limitation of this study includes my own bias because of my positionality. I am a Hmong woman and thus identify as a woman of color, and currently serve as an executive leader of my school district. I am aware my personal and professional experiences may have influenced the design of this study. However, it is important to note that “separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 45). Indeed, Maxwell encouraged researchers to consider their experiential knowledge to be a virtue versus a trait to bear.

Positionality and Experiential Knowledge of Researcher

My research topic was informed by empirical and theoretical studies as well as by my positionality as a Hmong American woman, and my experiential knowledge as an executive educational leader. My experiences added a source of insight, hypothesis, and validity check to the literature review, data collection, and data analysis. As Maxwell (2005) quoted C. Wright Mills (1959), “The most admirable scholars within the scholarly community . . . do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other” (p. 45). I brought my identity as a woman of color and also as an aspiring superintendent into this research study. My experiential knowledge includes having served mostly large and complex school systems as a youth advocate, teacher, assistant principal, principal, director, assistant superintendent and associate superintendent of schools in California, which adds a unique perspective to my study. Additionally, as an educator for 23 years, I have worked for 10 different superintendents. Of the 10 superintendents, only two have identified as women of color. I have also witnessed incredible and strong women of color leaders navigate through the political and unpredictable role of the superintendency, often filled with uncertainty, turmoil and strife; I have seen some do it well and have also seen moments of peril for many. Simultaneously, I have seen the elevation of countless colleagues promoted to senior executive management roles, most of whom identified as white men, leaving me to wonder about the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomenon for leaders who identify as women of color. Thus, my research questions and topic authentically stemmed from a place of curiosity, from a desire to enact and support change for gender and racial equity, and from a place filled with hope and dreams for the future.

Chapter 4: Vignettes and Career Maps

It is critical to examine the personal and professional lived experiences of each superintendent and search consultant against their career paths, in order to better understand the ascension of each woman into their current role. As shared in Chapter 3, I will use a career map to depict the multiple roles each participant held prior to becoming superintendent. Each career step is represented in a red or blue bar, with the job title of the role inside of the bar. I have added additional details about whether the role served as an elementary-level position, middle school-, high school-, or district-level position. The career maps provide a visual representation for the pathway as well as the number of positions each participant held before finally being able to serve as the superintendent. Additionally, I will provide a vignette from each individual's story, which will give a glimpse beyond their professional career and allow me to provide the personal context toward the findings revealed in chapters four through six. While not all case studies will be woven into the findings in chapters four through six, I will include information from the case studies where applicable and appropriate. I will also include the career maps for the two search consultants, as understanding their professional career will help to understand their consultant perspective.

Case Study 1: Superintendent Maria Sanchez

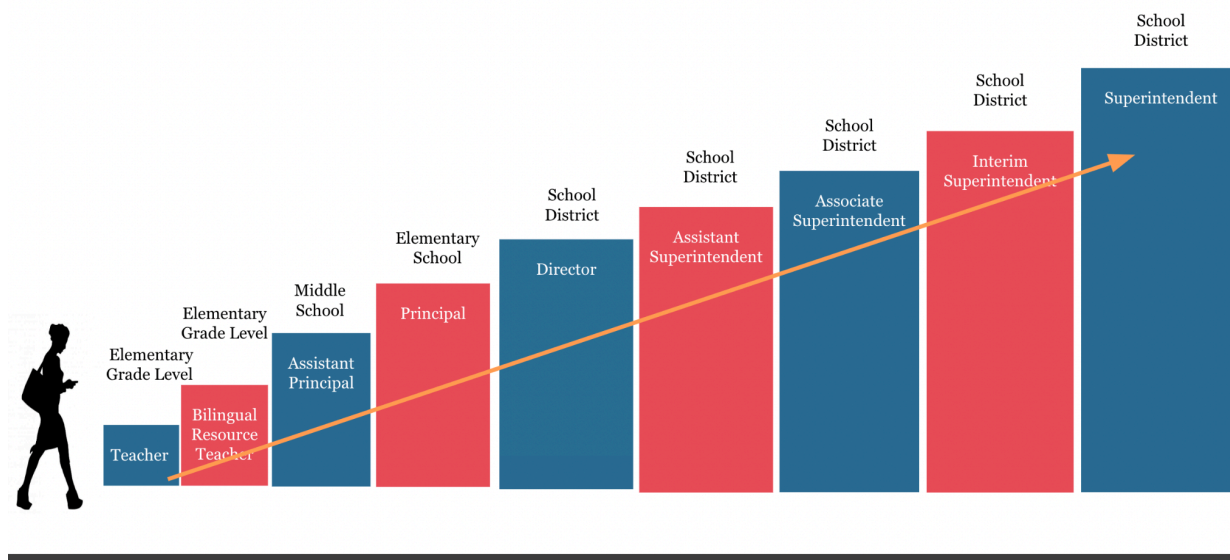
Maria Sanchez, who identifies as a Latina woman, is 54 years old and is a proud daughter of a migrant family. Maria is the oldest of her siblings and expressed that she has always felt responsible because of her birth order. Maria has four children, all boys, and what is unique about Maria is she was a stay-at-home mother for a very long time, raising her boys. She did not know she wanted to be a superintendent but did know she enjoyed school leadership. She also expressed clearly that she did not want to enter the superintendency until later in her career because she knew the challenges associated with the role, and wanted to truly prepare herself with the number of roles and experiences she had before entering the superintendency. It is also interesting to note that her husband, who is a Latino man, has served as a superintendent until recently. This is important because as Maria has worked her way into the superintendency, her husband serves as her closest confidant and advisor.

Maria started as a young student teacher in her current school district and was recently appointed permanent superintendent in the spring of 2022. Maria is very proud of her history and time in her district, although she did move a couple of times and worked in three other districts before coming back to her current school district. Her career has progressed through teacher, bilingual resource teacher, assistant principal of a middle school, principal of an elementary school, director, assistant superintendent, associate superintendent, interim superintendent, to superintendent. She and her husband are very well connected in their current school district, as it is also the city they have both lived and worked in for over fifteen years. Because her current city and board is majority Latino, she originally believed she would have tremendous support for her application to the superintendency. However, the board required her to go through an extensive and rigorous interview process to obtain her superintendency, when previously, the same board appointed the previous interim superintendent, a white male. I will go into more details of Maria's experience in Chapter 6, where I highlight Maria's lived experience as it relates to the search. Maria was an insider candidate, serving first as her school district's interim superintendent before applying for and receiving the offer of employment to serve as superintendent. Maria had officially completed her first year as superintendent at the time of the

interview. Figure 2 represents Maria's professional experiences leading to her ascension as superintendent.

Figure 2

Superintendent Maria Sanchez's Career Map



Case Study 2: Superintendent Olga Huezo

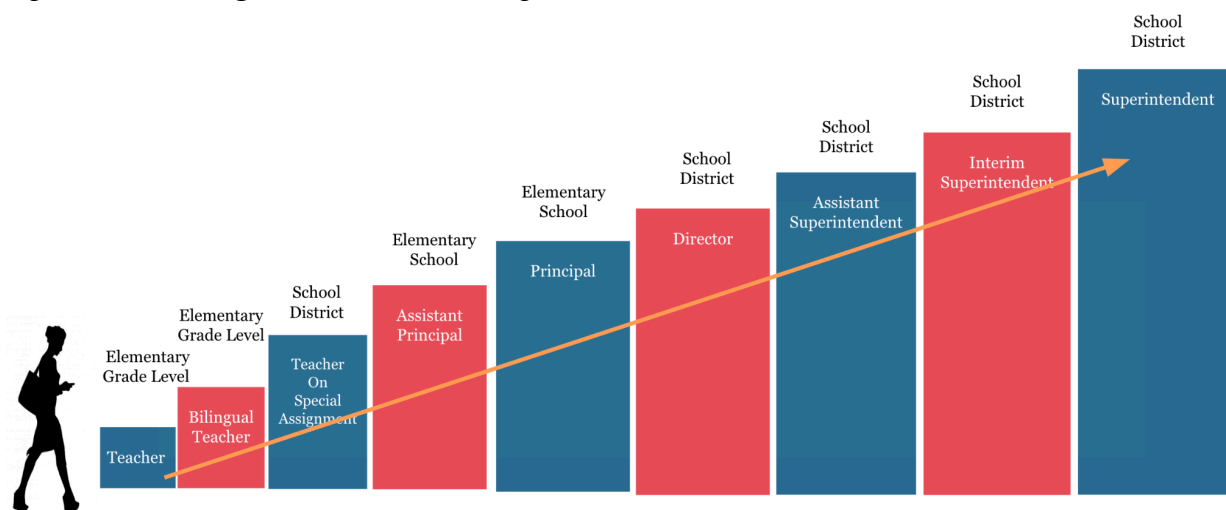
Olga Huezo identifies as a Latina woman, and is 50 years old. She is a proud daughter of an immigrant family and grew up in southern California. Olga's parents supported her family as school classified employees and, because of this, Olga expressed a great deal of appreciation for what are often the lowest paid and least visible employees of a school district. Olga is very proud of what her parents have done to support her and her multiple siblings, despite their low income and very little educational opportunities received. Olga is a proud UC Berkeley, first-generation graduate, and credits her academic and professional success to her parents. She is married with two children and also credits her husband and his family for supporting her ability to do the work of a busy superintendent, because she started so young. Olga was named superintendent of her school district at 41 years old, and heavily relied on her family to support her in raising her two children.

Olga started as a young teacher in the Teach for America program in a large Bay Area school district. She then moved back to southern California to teach for a large school district. Because her current significant other decided to stay in the Bay Area, she moved back to the Bay Area and from there was recruited to serve in her current school district as a bilingual teacher, teacher on special assignment, assistant principal of an elementary school, principal of an elementary school, director, assistant superintendent, interim superintendent, and superintendent. When her predecessor was asked to serve as a state-appointed administrator in a different school district, Olga received the opportunity to serve as the interim superintendent while the board decided to conduct a search for a permanent superintendent. She decided to apply because many of the board members asked her to. She shared that she was glad she went through the process of applying and appointment. She wanted the city to know she achieved the position by going through the same process any other public member would have had to go through, and that this was very important to her. She spoke extensively of mentors and sponsors along her career path,

and I will share more of her story in Chapter 7. Figure 3 represents Olga’s professional experiences leading to her ascension as superintendent.

Figure 3

Superintendent Olga Huevo’s Career Map



Case Study 3: Superintendent Harriet Young

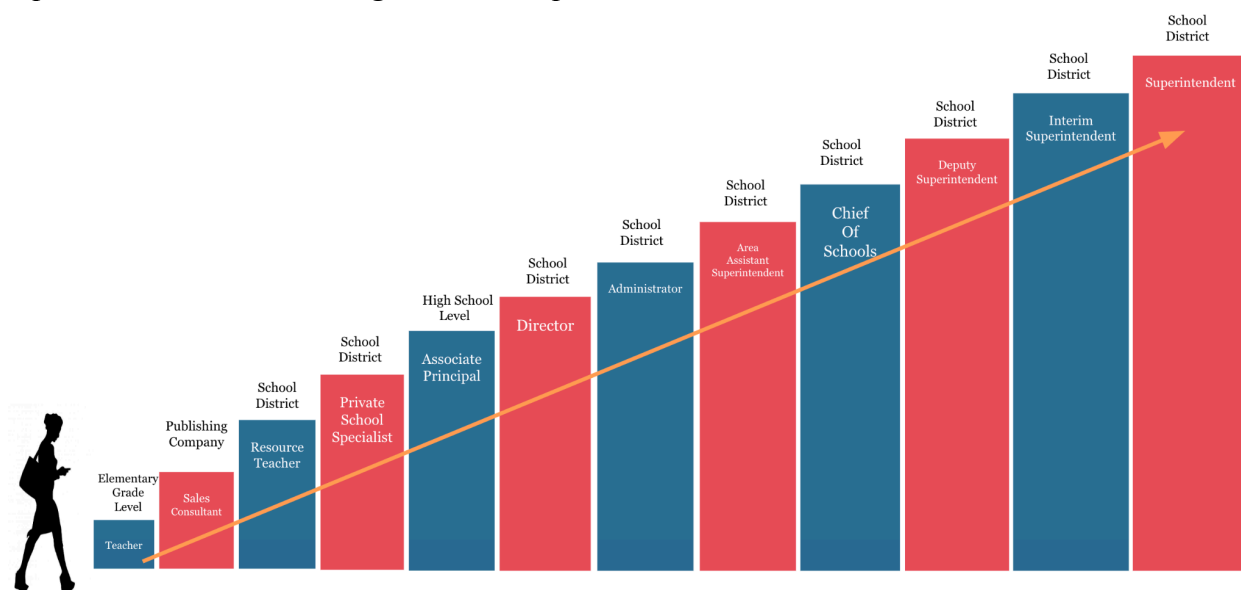
Harriet Young identifies as a Black woman and is 60 years old. She is a proud daughter of an Indiana politician and was very close to her father. She is the youngest in her family and grew up in a racially divided and racially charged town in Indiana. Harriet intentionally leads with compassion and empathy because of what she has personally experienced as a young Black girl. Harriet was subjected to racism and discrimination in her own neighborhood and in school, as a young student. Harriet’s experience with racism as well as her observations of many who have had to suffer through hate, has taught her to treat others the way she would have wanted to be treated. This is an example of what she faced as a young Black girl in Indiana:

Growing up in Indiana, going through what we went through as kids because my father was a builder and built my mother’s house out in the country, which is maybe seven minutes from the city in Indiana. But, they burned our house down. Well, they tried to burn our house down. They put a burnt cross out front. Put the “N” word all over our walls and I was a little girl of eight or nine remembering [this, asking], “Why would someone do this?” My dad, he cleaned it all up. And within two weeks, we were moved into the house. But we weren’t wanted. We were called the “N” word all the time going to school. My brothers and sister pretty much fought their way through [school]. So by the time I was coming up through the ranks, I used it as leverage. You know, my maiden name is Jones [pseudonym], I’m a Jones. You mess with me, and you know, so I didn’t really have to fight much. But they [my brothers and sister] fought pretty much every day just because they were tired of being called the “N” word and all those other derogatory names. So my journey started when I was younger. And so now when I see how people interact and react to me, I’m so used to it. I know how to navigate it, which is unfortunate. But it’s just the truth.

Harriet also credits her father for teaching her how to navigate politics. Her father ran for a local city council seat and won in a region and time when Black men and women were not supported. Because of her father's ability to work with all people, including helping everyone to come to a consensus despite differing political views, Harriet said she was able to receive the best preparation for the superintendency by working with her father during the early years of her young adult life. Harriet is married with three grown adult children and is a grandmother to multiple grandchildren. She also credits her husband for helping her to stay balanced.

Harriet started as a teacher in an Indiana school district. Because she was innovative with technology as a young teacher, she was quickly chosen to pilot much of the technological solutions to be embedded within the instructional day. The publishing company of these technological solutions were impressed by Harriet's innovative approach, and quickly convinced her to serve as one of the leading technological sales consultants for their western United States team. Harriet then left the classroom and moved to California, where she served as the sales consultant for this educational technology firm. However, because the job required her to travel extensively, and with a young family of three boys, she decided to resign from her sales position and enter the teaching field again, only this time in California. Her career path has included serving as a teacher, sales consultant, resource teacher, private school specialist, associate principal of a high school, director, administrator, area assistant superintendent, chief of schools, deputy superintendent, interim superintendent, and superintendent. It's important to note that at the time of the interview, Harriet was interim superintendent. However, she was appointed superintendent in the early spring of 2024. Her board did not require her to go through the application process, and expressed dissatisfaction with the search firms that submitted in response to their request-for-proposal process. After a few months of engaging with search firm proposals, the board decided Harriet was the best candidate and appointed her for the position. Figure 4 represents Harriet's professional experiences leading to her ascension as superintendent.

Figure 4
Superintendent Harriet Young's Career Map



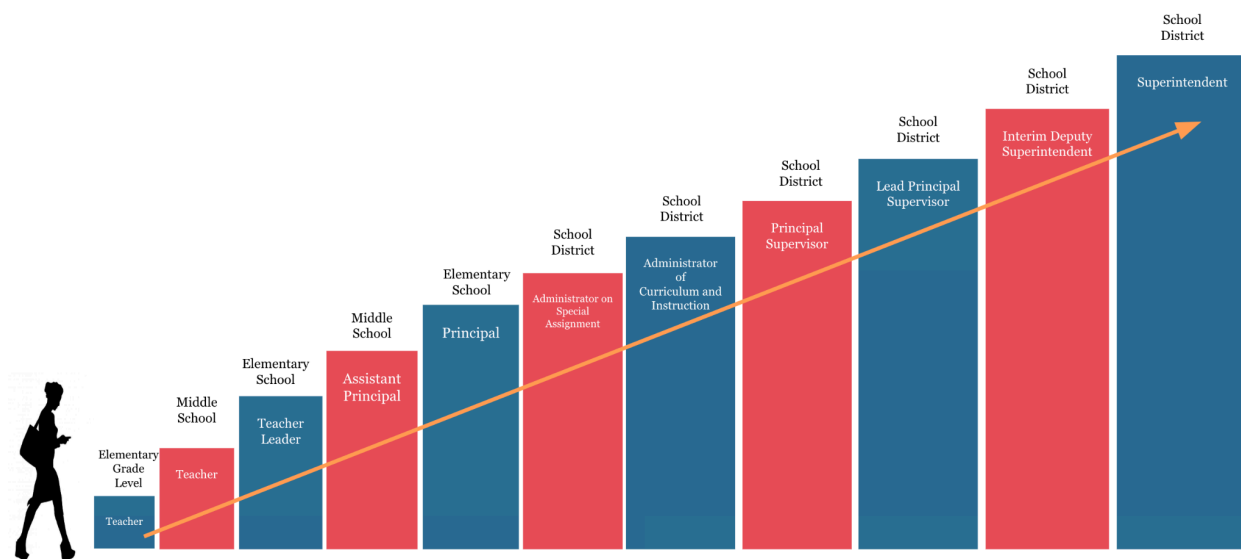
Case Study 4: Superintendent Angela Jones

Dr. Angela Jones identifies as a Black woman and is 47 years old. She is a proud daughter of an educator and is a third-generation educator in her family. Her grandmother was a teacher and her mother was a speech therapist, teacher, and administrator. She grew up serving public education through volunteering because of her family, but did not think she would enter education professionally. She matriculated into and completed college with the intent to pursue corporate law. However, she recalls interviewing for a law firm on the east coast, and while her interviewer offered her the position of paralegal, the interviewer also shared with Angela that half of her interview included stories and experiences of working with youth and children. This experience helped her to realize her true joy was in serving students. She entered Teach for America and eventually returned to California to serve her community.

Angela's career path has included serving as a teacher in both elementary and middle school, assistant principal, principal, administrator on special assignment, administrator of curriculum and instruction, principal supervisor, lead principal supervisor, interim deputy superintendent, and superintendent. Angela spoke extensively about those who have sponsored and supported her along the way. That support has inspired her to become a board member of one organization, supporting women of color to rise to the role of superintendency. I will go into details about Angela's work in this role in Chapter 7, where I discuss the findings around resilience. Figure 5 represents Angela's professional experiences leading to her ascension as superintendent.

Figure 5

Superintendent Angela Jones's Career Map



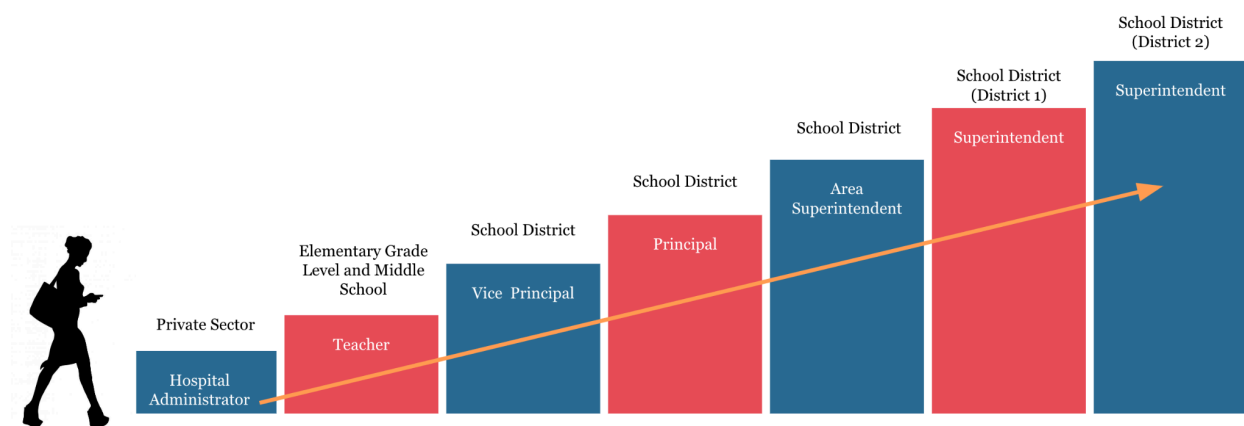
Case Study 5: Superintendent Irene Kim

Dr. Irene Kim identifies as a Korean woman and is 57 years old. Her parents immigrated to America from Korea. Her mother was a teacher in Korea but wanted Irene to be a doctor like so many "Asian parents." Irene shared, "So my parents initially wanted me to go into medicine or become a pharmacist or a doctor as a typical Asian parent. So, I kind of compromised and

volunteered and worked in the hospital business office.” However, Irene knew she did not want to enter the medical field and that she wanted to be a teacher. She worked in the administrative offices in a large hospital for ten years, and then secretly put herself back through school and obtained her teaching credential. Upon receiving her teaching credential, for eight years she maintained her hospital administrative job in the evenings while she taught during the day. After she entered the school administrative ranks as a vice principal, her day schedule as a school administrator was too time consuming, and she left her night job in the medical administrative office.

Irene’s career path has included serving as a hospital administrator simultaneously as a teacher, vice principal, principal, area superintendent, and then superintendent in a different district for four years, prior to her current position, where she just completed her seventh year as superintendent. In both districts where she has served as superintendent, Irene was and is the first female superintendent the districts have ever had. In her current district, Irene is the first female and person of color the district has ever had in the position of superintendent. In both districts, Irene’s predecessors, whom she referred to as part of the “good-old-boys network,” were terminated due to legal issues. When her current board hired her seven years ago, she shared with them that she was a transformational leader who might be disruptive to the status quo. They assured her that she was what they were looking for. Figure 6 represents Irene’s career trajectory over the past 24 years in education.

Figure 6
Superintendent Irene Kim’s Career Map



Case Study 6: Superintendent Christy Manalo

Dr. Christy Manalo identifies as a half Filipina, half white woman and is 53 years old. Both of her parents are educators, and like Dr. Angela Jones, Christy is a proud third-generation educator. She is in her sixth year as superintendent in her current school district, and while she did not know she was going to enter the field of education at first, she credits her experience as a young biracial student and daughter to a mixed-race couple living within modest means as one of the main reasons she pivoted to public education service after her undergraduate studies. She said about her deliberate decision to enter public education,

I did quite deliberately choose education thinking that was the pathway to happiness, and I decided to dedicate my life to serving children, particularly underserved populations of children, because I am biracial. I was born at a time when anti-miscegenation laws were highly prolific across the United States, and it was just about to be overturned by the United States Supreme Court, in the case *Loving v. Virginia*. I reflected on this because not only was poverty part of my childhood, because my parents were teenage parents. My dad had just turned 19. My mom, I think it was like a week or two had turned 21 when she had me. They had been high-school sweethearts, and it was very, very rare to see a white Caucasian man dating a Filipina at the time in the 1970s. And so this is critical to who I am and my lens to education and the children that I serve.

After completing her undergraduate studies at University of California, Berkeley, Christy decided to pursue her master's degree and teaching credential at the University of California, Los Angeles. She completed her master's degree in education and her multiple-subject teaching credential with an emphasis in crosscultural, language, and academic development (CLAD). Christy was proud to have attended such a prestigious university because of the quality researchers and professors she was exposed to, who taught some of the best practices in education. Christy also attributes the opportunities available to her throughout her career to the expert training she received at UCLA. She spoke extensively to the formal preparation she received, and credits this training as helping her to learn the professional skills necessary to be successful as an educator and superintendent.

After having taught only three years in the classroom, Christy was invited to pursue her administrative credential. Christy did not have any aspirations to become an administrator, but was curious enough to enroll at San Diego State University to earn her administrative services credential. Christy's action debunks the myth that women lack the capability, desire, or confidence to engage in leadership roles. In fact, she was sought out to pursue administration because of these very traits: her confidence and ability to engage students encouraged them to work hard, improving academic performance and ultimately delivering positive results.

After serving approximately six years as a principal, Christy was offered yet another opportunity. Only six years into her principalship, she received an offer to pursue a terminal degree in education. She was selected to join a competitive cohort of approximately 17 students to complete her doctoral degree through a joint program between UC San Diego, San Diego State University, and California State University, San Marcos.

I did complete my doctoral degree in 2009. . . . It's the other reason that launched me into cabinet positions. We were hand picked—the 17 individuals to become the next generation of assistant superintendents and superintendents in the county. That was the vision of UCSD, SDSU, and Cal State San Marcos. And indeed, of the 17 of us, I believe 15 of us all became assistant superintendents and superintendents, and about seven or eight of us became superintendents.

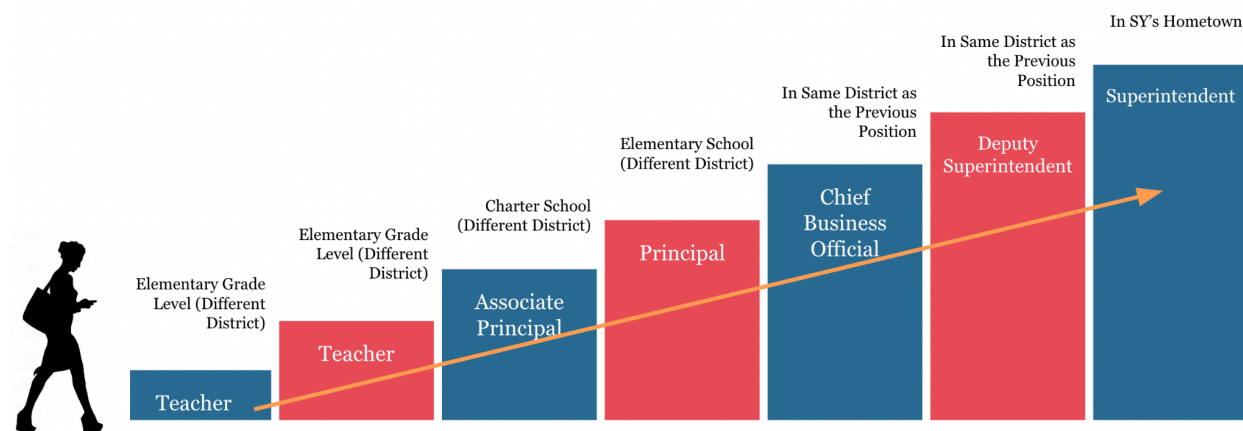
While Christy was completing her doctorate, she was also invited to apply to serve as the chief business officer (CBO) for her school district. She admitted to having an inclination toward mathematics but was pleasantly surprised to have been offered this position, especially as the business side of education is not typically the pathway for those who came up the ranks from the instructional side. Christy went on to serve as the CBO for eight years. The central office was

eventually restructured and her job shifted to deputy superintendent, for which she served an additional four years. Christy shared that she received some of the best professional development in this timeframe of her career because of the network of CBOs from her county that embraced her, as well as the mentorship of her superintendent. Christy continued by sharing that her superintendent

showed me how to run every single department. And he just had a beautiful style of leadership that was so embracing of diversity and inclusion. And I'm so grateful to him for being probably one of my best mentors in my whole career, of just a collaboration, right, being a leader that's collaborative and inclusive and caring for children at the center of all of our work, and at the same time nurturing for the staff that we work with. And such a good listener, like a true humanitarian.

Christy's career path was different from others because she did not arrive at the superintendency solely by way of the instructional side of education. She was given the opportunity to serve as the CBO for her school district for eight years and is thankful for this because she felt adequately trained as both an instructional leader and a business leader in preparation for the role of superintendent. I will discuss Christy's experience more extensively in Chapter 5, in regard to findings around career paths toward the superintendency. Figure 7 represents Christy's professional experiences leading to her current role as superintendent.

Figure 7
Superintendent Christy Manalo's Career Map



Case Study 7: Search Consultant Maggie Rodriguez

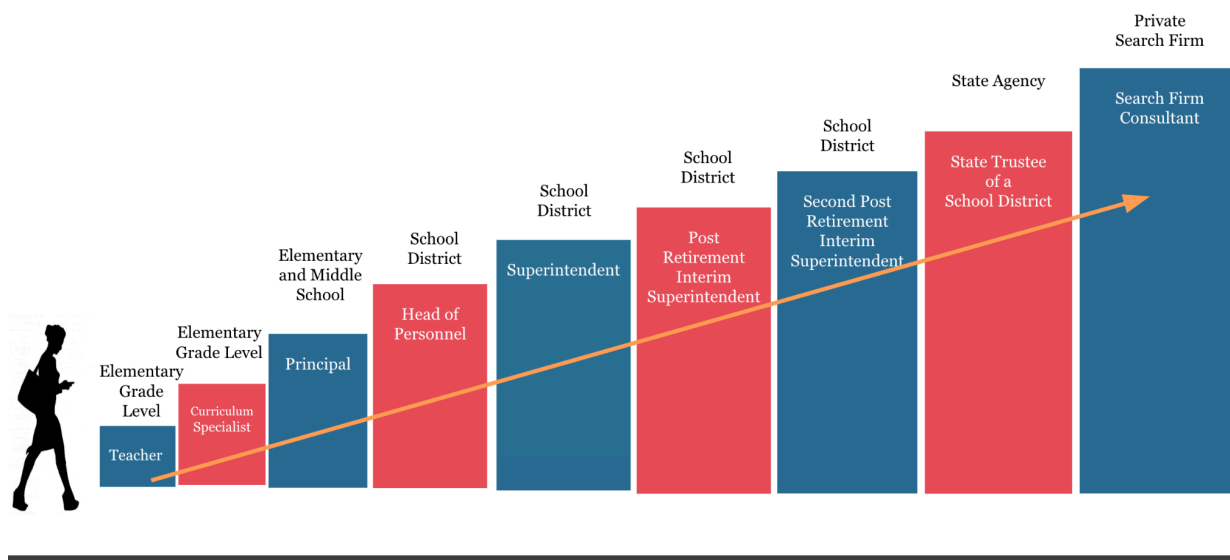
While most of my data collection is from sitting superintendents, I thought it was important to get the perspectives of current search consultants, and even better if I was able to find women of color serving as search consultants. Consultant Dr. Maggie Rodriguez is in her 70s and is a retired educator and long-time superintendent turned search consultant for a large, national search firm. She spent more than 40 years in education and has served as teacher, curriculum specialist, principal, head of the personnel department, superintendent, interim superintendent in two different school districts post retirement, and state trustee of a school

district, and currently serves as a search firm consultant. It is not unusual for school boards to request a retired superintendent to support their school district on an interim basis for a variety of reasons, until the district is able to backfill with a permanent superintendent. Maggie identifies as a Hispanic woman and is also a founding member of a national association for Latino administrators and superintendents. She has conducted multiple searches, including in the state of California and outside of California. She has also led a statewide association's superintendent's academy for numerous years, supporting and training aspiring leaders to learn the skills necessary to serve as a superintendent. Her network is extensive because of her long-time service in education, both locally and nationally.

Maggie's perspective is critical because, as a search consultant, she directly supports the work of helping school boards to search for, interview, and select their school superintendent, whenever a vacancy exists. Maggie's perspective will be shared in Chapter 6, where I discuss the findings related to the search, the second theme of my overall findings. Figure 8 represents Maggie's professional experiences leading to her current role as search firm consultant.

Figure 8

Search Firm Consultant Maggie Rodriguez's Career Map



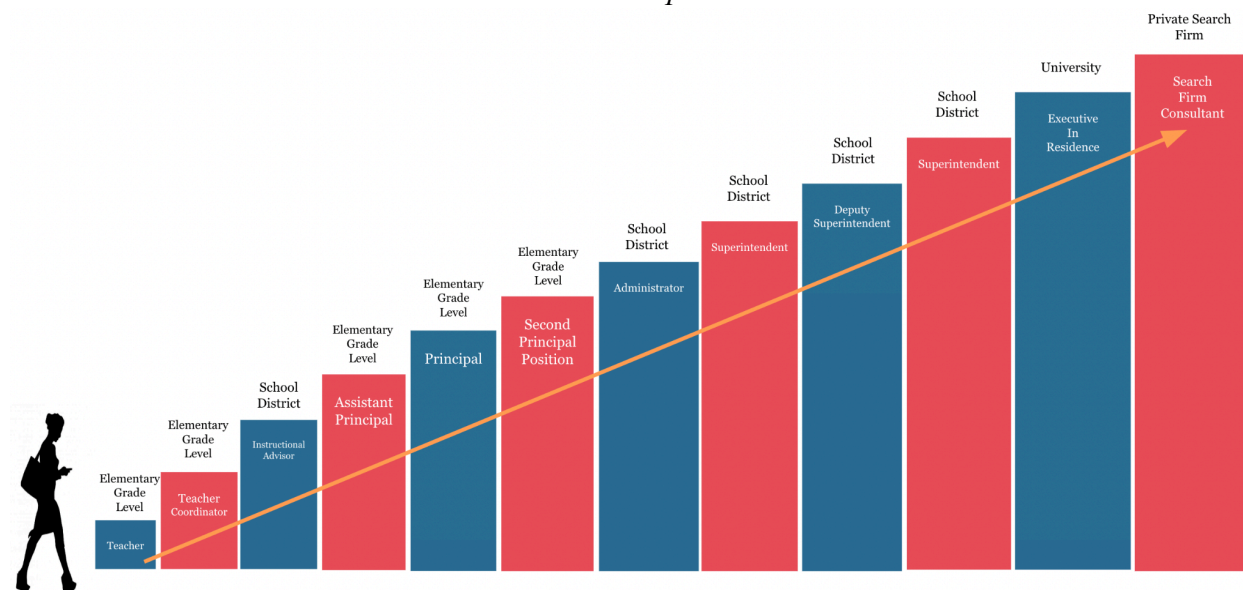
Case Study 8: Search Consultant Norma Flores

Dr. Norma Flores is in her 70s and identifies as a Hispanic woman. Norma served for more than 40 years in the K–12 educational system, coming up the ranks as a teacher, teacher coordinator, instructional advisor, assistant principal, principal, administrator, superintendent, deputy superintendent, and executive in residence at a university. She currently serves as a search firm consultant. She served as a superintendent for 14 years and has conducted searches for large school districts, including some of the largest school districts in the state of California. Norma is also active in a national association for Latino administrators and superintendents. In addition, she has authored multiple books and is currently teaching and directing a prestigious urban superintendent academy at a premiere university. With the number of years she has dedicated to public education, her network is extensive, both locally and nationally.

Like Maggie in Case Study 7, Norma's perspective is critical because of the work she does to help school boards with their superintendent vacancy, but also because of her work in

developing school superintendents in her current academy. Figure 9 represents Norma's professional experiences leading to her current role as search firm consultant.

Figure 9
Search Firm Consultant Norma Flores's Career Map



Chapter Summary

The vignettes and career maps in this chapter provided a brief overview of each superintendent and consultant's professional work, leading to their current role. Regarding the superintendents, it is important to note the gates each superintendent had to walk through to get to their current role. It is also important to note the age range of each superintendent interviewed. The earliest the superintendency was achieved was at 41 years of age, and the latest was at 60 years of age. In the next three chapters, I will present the findings around three overarching themes: the career path toward the superintendency, the search, and the resilient factors that support a woman of color to successfully lead and thrive in the role of the superintendent.

Chapter 5: The Career Path Toward the Superintendency

To better understand the path by which these women of color have ascended to their superintendency, it is important to understand gatekeeping theory and the different gates the participants of this study have traversed. In this chapter, I will reveal three findings under the theme of the career path toward the superintendency. These findings also help answer my first research question: What are the career paths women of color take on their journey to superintendency?

The first set of findings centers around the variable routes in the participant's formal preparation for the superintendency. The second set of findings reveals the informal preparation the superintendents experienced, on their path toward the superintendency. Finally, the third set of findings speaks to the most common pathway for the participants of this study. Table 4 illustrates the categories and sample quotes for this chapter.

Finding 1: Variable Routes of Formal Preparation for the Superintendency

A central objective of this study was to gain insight into the ascension of these women of color who have broken through barriers and attained superintendency. One of the findings across multiple interviews is the variable routes in the participant's formal preparation for the demands of the superintendency. I define *formal preparation* as the formal institutional preparation programs that result in a graduate degree or a superintendent's academy program, which results in a certificate of completion.

Formal Education for the Superintendency

All participants received formal preparation for the superintendency via their post-secondary university educational programs. All six superintendents interviewed needed a minimum of a master's degree and an administrative credential to qualify for their position. Three of the six participants have only a bachelor's and master's degree. The other three participants have their doctorate degree. As part of the formal preparation in a master's program, doctoral program, and administrative services credential program, all participants completed a foundational leadership course that covered the politics of leading an organization. Additionally, for those who completed a doctoral program, they often took classes from instructors who had previously served as superintendents and were able to facilitate discourse about the politics that superintendents needed to navigate.

Table 4

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1: What Are the Career Paths Women of Color Take on Their Journey to the Superintendency?

Main Findings	Sample Quotes
<p>Formal preparation programs help prepare and influence the career path for superintendents.</p>	<p>“It opened a door. Had I not been approached to join the doctoral program, I don’t think that I would have seen myself in a cabinet position. I didn’t know what came next after the principalship. I didn’t understand nor was I trying to understand the organizational structure of a school district. But in the doctoral program, all of our professors were retired superintendents. So the lens by which we learned was from the superintendent’s lens.” (Superintendent Christy Manalo, Case Study 6)</p> <p>“Eventually, I kind of thought of her as more of like a second mom, kind of like, she took care of me through my dissertation process. And then afterwards, she was one that I did seek advice from when I was applying for superintendent jobs.” (Superintendent Irene Kim, Case Study 5)</p>
<p>Informal preparation helps to grow superintendents’ political acumen and relational capacity.</p>	<p>“I had this team of 41 chief business officials, all of whom sat on the board for the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, FCMAT and the like. They were so good. And so then I had all the experts around me to learn school finance, to the point when California shifted from a revenue limit system of funding public schools to a local control funding formula. I ended up as the field expert for the State of California Legislative Task Force to develop the LCFF formula.” (Superintendent Christy Manalo, Case Study 6)</p>
<p>Instructional leadership roles are the most common pathway for women of color leaders. Non-instructional leadership experiences are desirable.</p>	<p>“My dad grew up in Indiana and he was a politician and ran for city council and won. The only reason he won in Indiana was because he ran as a Republican, even though he was a Democrat. I watched him interact with very racist people and I don’t think I realized until later that my [father did not receive a formal education]. . . . I don’t think he finished high school. But my dad ran for office and he won, and so I watched how he navigated politically with people. I watched the different meetings that he would go to at restaurants with older white men, knowing they pretty much on the weekends were Klansmen, but they would have to meet with my dad. And sometimes I would go with him. And so it started there, with my dad.” (Superintendent Harriet Young, Case Study 3)</p>
<p>Instructional leadership roles are the most common pathway for women of color leaders. Non-instructional leadership experiences are desirable.</p>	<p>“I can’t underscore enough in terms of women who are preparing for the superintendent role to have as broad a base of experience as possible. Don’t get yourself pigeonholed into a particular area. Try to get as broad a base as possible, because it’s going to be your best selling point with a board.” (Search Consultant Norma Flores, Case Study 8)</p> <p>“[If] you have two areas [of expertise], mitigate the third one. For women especially, get your CBO certificate. That way, you have an additional qualification or piece of evidence there. I encourage all women now if they don’t have that, and if they came out of HR [human resources] or instruction, get that.” (Search Consultant Maggie Rodriguez, Case Study 7)</p>

Christy Manalo said about her doctoral program and the influence of her program on her decision to pursue the superintendency,

It opened a door. Had I not been approached to join the doctoral program, I don't think that I would have seen myself in a cabinet position. I didn't know what came next after the principalship. I didn't understand nor was I trying to understand the organizational structure of a school district. But in the doctoral program, all of our professors were retired superintendents. So the lens by which we learned was from the superintendent's lens.

Christy shared that she did not know the steps of leadership and did not know what came after the principalship, but because of the exposure she received from her doctoral program, including the exposure to all of her professors who were retired superintendents, she was inspired to pursue central office leadership after her principalship. This exposure from these formal educational spaces is critical for more women of color candidates, like Christy, to access the superintendency.

A second example of exposure to educational leadership was shared by Angela Jones, from her undergraduate years in Philadelphia.

When I was in college in West Philadelphia, I just got involved with the local community of West Philadelphia, and I'm on the board actually now as a board member of the program at the university. I spent a lot of time as an undergraduate student in the Philadelphia school system. They [the university] have a university-assisted community schools partnership with the Philadelphia school system, so I got involved teaching reading to middle school students who were incarcerated and helped to design an after-school program.

Angela further shared that she initially wanted to enter law, but the exposure she received in the Philadelphia school system inspired her and, as a result, helped her to recognize she prefers to work with youth in the public education system. Both Christy and Angela entered their formal educational institutions not planning to serve as superintendent years later. The implications, however, are important for formal educational institutions, in that they have a role in helping underrepresented students access the superintendency and leadership positions through their chosen curriculum, opportunities, personnel, and the educational experience and design they put in place for students.

Similar to Christy, Irene Kim was inspired by one of her professors in her doctoral program. Irene was so inspired by this professor that not only was the professor on her dissertation committee, but years later, Irene would consult her regularly when considering the role of superintendency.

Eventually, I kind of thought of her as more of like a second mom, kind of like, she took care of me through my dissertation process. And then afterwards, she was one that I did seek advice from when I was applying for superintendent jobs.

While formal education was required to meet the qualifications for the superintendency, the surprising revelation in my research is that participation in a formal educational program

brought additional benefits that might not be captured through a formal curriculum. These benefits include the unplanned relationships with instructors and professors that were so inspiring that it encouraged students to see the possibilities beyond today. For Christy, Angela, and Kim, their experiences in their formal preparation and educational institutions gave them access to the position of the superintendency.

Finding 2: Political Acumen and Relationships Are Central to Informal Preparation for the Superintendency

Participants also discussed what I label as informal preparation. I define *informal preparation* as the experiences that resulted in lessons learned and skills received in preparation for the superintendent position, most of which are personal to the superintendent. The surprising finding is in this informal preparation, and how understated and valuable these experiences are to the participants. All participants shared personal stories of informal preparation or career training on their path toward the superintendency. However, it is in the way the participants connected these experiences as preparation for the position that elucidates informal preparation as a strategy aspiring superintendents should pay attention to or look for, in order to prepare them for the position.

Growing Your Political Acumen

Given the political demands of the superintendency, all participants spoke of the need to continue to study and learn about the local, state, and national politics that permeate boardrooms and classrooms. Given each community's politics are unique, superintendents spoke to the time and commitment they invested in understanding their political environments. Participants also reported the need to know their board member's priorities, so that they would be prepared to navigate the implications of their board member's priorities as it relates to the political issues.

Christy Manalo elaborated on her informal preparation for the fiscal side of the superintendency, which is often one of the most politically contentious areas for superintendents. Christy quickly learned school finance and avoided political landmines connected with school finance through her collegial connections and network with all the CBOs of her county:

I had this team of 41 chief business officials, all of whom sat on the board for the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, FCMAT and the like. They were so good. And so then I had all the experts around me to learn school finance, to the point when California shifted from a revenue limit system of funding public schools to a local control funding formula. I ended up as the field expert to the State of California Legislative Task Force to develop the LCFF formula.

Christy was able to prepare for the business side of the superintendency through her network and through on-the-job learning with her CBO colleagues. This was not a formal enrollment into an institutional program; rather, this was her connecting to and staying engaged with her colleagues so that she was not just prepared for the superintendency, but became a state expert where school financing is concerned.

A second example was shared by Harriet Young. Harriet entered the superintendency under very tumultuous times for her school district. Her predecessor, the previous superintendent, was asked to part ways with the board and was given 48 hours to vacate the building. This caused a huge divide amongst the board members between those who wanted him

to leave versus those who wanted him to stay. In addition, because Harriet's board was also racially divided, this caused or exacerbated racial tensions. The board members of color wanted Harriet's predecessor gone while the white board members wanted him to stay. Harriet's identity as a Black woman and a person of color meant she treaded lightly as an interim superintendent the first few weeks, because of the racial division amongst the board. She did not want the white board members to think she would only side with the board members of color, and did not want the board members of color to think she would automatically side with them because she was a person of color. I asked her to elaborate on her racial and political astuteness.

My dad grew up in Indiana and he was a politician and ran for city council and won. The only reason he won in Indiana was because he ran as a Republican, even though he was a Democrat. I watched him interact with very racist people, and I don't think I realized until later that my [father did not receive a formal education]. . . . I don't think he finished high school. But my dad ran for office and he won, and so I watched how he navigated politically with people. I watched the different meetings that he would go to at restaurants with older white men, knowing they pretty much on the weekends were Klansmen, but they would have to meet with my dad. And sometimes I would go with him. And so it started there, with my dad.

Harriet's informal preparation was different from that of Christy Manalo. Whereas Christy expressed appreciation for her collegial relationships, Harriet shared her preparation for the role from a much more personal perspective. Harriet's personal experience of watching her father serve as a local city councilman provided her a preview for what would be tumultuous political waters for her in her adult life as a superintendent. Given the cultural, racial, and political divide that superintendents today have to manage, Harriet realized she picked up much of her bridge-building skills from watching her father navigate politics as a local politician in rural Indiana. Harriet's political acumen and intuition as well as her relational capacity helped her tremendously with mending bridges with her board and with her employee bargaining groups. Harriet's informal preparation took shape in childhood and had an impact throughout her career.

It's important to note that Harriet's personal experiences with navigating race and politics supported her current context. This may not always be the case for all superintendents, as local context and local politics for superintendents vary greatly from city to city and sometimes within different districts located within the same city. Informal preparation is highly individualized and can be highly influential on aspiring superintendents, and thus, it is important for aspiring superintendents to be attuned to the political lessons learned on their own paths toward the superintendency.

Fostering Relationships With All Educational Partners

All of the participants expressed the need to continue to foster relationships with their school board, educational partners, and community. Sometimes, this building of relationships means the superintendents are in constant communication with their community and board, whereas other times it means they listen empathetically. Christy Manalo shared that in her first year as superintendent, she entered a fractured and broken system, filled with mistrust for the office of the superintendent because of her predecessor's actions. She outlined how she built trust and relationships with her community.

I thought, well, maybe rather than look at my position, as the superintendent, maybe I could perceive my position from the cultural lens of my Filipino culture. And that cultural lens was that in Filipino culture, we have extended families, just like Hispanic/Latino culture has extended families. And oftentimes, there's a matriarch or patriarch that takes care of the whole family. So I really entered my superintendency with this cultural lens of being a mother, the lead mother of the family. So why not come in with this approach of nurturing and care and love for a family that needed this lens of being blessed to have this amazing opportunity that I never thought I would have in my whole life.

Christy immediately went to work on building relationships and trust through what she called a "cultural lens" of care, love, and nurture. However, because each superintendent worked under different dynamics, each superintendent spoke to fostering relationships from a unique perspective, customized and shaped differently depending on the current needs of their district. Angela Jones entered a system filled with tumultuous labor relations. She quickly learned she needed to build a relationship with her labor leaders, but also knew she had to quickly learn when she could push and when she needed to compromise.

Labor, particularly in the state of California, is a huge challenge. You have to know how to navigate it, you have to know when you can be aggressive and when you can't. [You have to know] when you partner and know when you may strategically kind of go against [them]. That's a very challenging position.

Angela's example and relationship with her local labor organization requires her to be much more strategic, given the Californian educational landscape where labor partnerships are a significant factor in a superintendent's tenure. She also shared she has had two labor work stoppages, and yet, she is finishing her seventh year as superintendent. In Chapter 7, I will share more of her perspective on networks, and the implications for how networks support relationships.

In a third example, Irene Kim shared a lesson she learned along her career path, where she adjusted her communication style to gain the trusting relationship she needed from her staff members.

I found that when I was a principal. . . . I was super focused and direct. I would think about all the things I had to do and would pass by people, not even realizing that I passed by people without saying hello. So I had to work on that and be aware of where I am at. So, you know, building relationships is important and [it] takes time to slow down. You can still be effective and do both.

Irene's reflections illuminated her need to adjust her leadership style to support her relationships with her staff. In all examples, the superintendents shared specific relational examples that were unique to their community and politics. Harriet elaborated on the time she has invested in her board, to support her relationship with her board members individually, as well as to help them to work together collectively.

I've had to ease my way in with some of them [board members]. Yes, I meet them one to one. I was on a phone call right before I jumped on with you. It wasn't a scheduled call, but I take calls, emails, and texts from them throughout the day, always.

She also shared that she often calls individual board members to explain the thinking or votes of the majority, to help a minority-vote board member to stay positive and understand the intent of the actions of the majority. This investment, dedication, and communication of superintendents with their boards is important for future aspirants to understand, especially with the nuanced and local politics unique to each city and its board.

Relationships matter with all educational partners; however, context also matters in how each participant supports their relationships. Many stakeholders, with different priorities, want access to the superintendent. As a result, the position requires both the formal and informal preparation necessary to be better prepared for the complexities of the superintendency.

Finding 3: The Most Common Professional Pathway for the Superintendency is Through Instructional Leadership

The second finding centers the instructional leadership pathway of the participants. Five of the six superintendents arrived to their role through the instructional side of leadership. The pathway for all six participants, generally speaking, includes: teacher, resource teacher, site administrator, central office administrator, superintendent. The unique deviation comes at the point of central office administrator. All but Christy served as an instructional leader in the central office, whereas Christy was the only participant who served as a business leader, in her role as the CBO. Two sub-findings emerged from the data analysis. One sub-finding includes the traditional path women of color superintendents experienced toward their ascension to the superintendency. I define *traditional pathway* as the path most common for women of color who have ascended to the superintendency, which is through the instructional side of K–12 education. An example of this pathway is teacher, principal, curriculum director, education services assistant superintendent, and superintendent. The other sub-finding includes the desire of all the participants interviewed for this study to have had a broad base of non-traditional experiences in preparation for the superintendency. These non-traditional experiences include any position on the business, facilities, and operations side of leadership.

Instructional Leadership Roles Qualifies You for the Job; However, “A Broad Base of Experience” Lands You the Job

The traditional roles prior to the superintendency, particularly for women of color, have been in the instructional leadership side (Robinson et al., 2017). Five of the six participants in this research served in instructional leadership roles prior to their current superintendent position. As seen in the career ladders of the participants in Chapter 4, the traditional roles generally held are in this order: teacher, teacher on special assignment/curriculum specialist, assistant principal, principal, district administrator of curriculum and instruction, superintendent. This study suggests that it is advantageous to have instructional leadership and instructional expertise as an aspiring superintendent. However, with the demands of the superintendency and the politics associated with budgets, facilities, and bonds, it's important for candidates to diversify their experiences prior to entering the superintendency. Angela Jones said,

Most women have a similar pathway that I did. You're coming up through the academic side. If we're not getting the level of training around, what's a bond? What's a personal tax? How do you look at financial reporting? [We need this experience.]

Angela further emphasized her advice to aspiring superintendents by sharing,

You rarely lose your job because student achievement doesn't accelerate the way it needs to. You lose your job if you've got a political situation you didn't handle well or a financial situation you didn't handle well. And that tends to be the areas where a lot of women coming into these roles don't tend to come in through."

Angela continued by reflecting that if she had known as a young central office leader what she knows now as a superintendent, she would have signed up to serve on business committees, completed a CBO certification, and engaged in facility meetings. Five out of six of my research participants did not mention holding business-related positions prior to their superintendency. More specifically, the five had little experience with fiscal/budget management, facilities and school buildings management, and facilitation of passing a bond measure or the management of a bond. Only one out of the six superintendents had previously held the position of CBO, which typically supervises all of the aforementioned areas. Search Consultant Norma Flores emphasized the importance of candidates broadening their experience for the role of superintendent:

I can't underscore enough in terms of women who are preparing for the superintendent role to have as broad a base of experience as possible. Don't get yourself pigeonholed into a particular area. Try to get as broad a base as possible, because it's going to be your best selling point with a board.

In addition to exposing oneself to the non-traditional roles, it is also important to be visible in educational association conferences and academies, or certification programs, which may expose candidates to areas outside of the traditional path. Search consultant Maggie Rodriguez had this advice to share:

[If] you have two areas [of expertise], mitigate the third one. For women especially, get your CBO certificate. That way, you have an additional qualification or piece of evidence there. I encourage all women now if they don't have that, and if they came out of HR [human resources] or instruction, get that.

Aspiring women of color superintendents can build a broad base of expertise by participating in the different academies offered through the multiple organizations in California and across the country, as well as attending conferences to build their networks.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 revealed findings critical to the career path to the superintendency. Half of the six superintendents pursued and completed their doctorate degree, while the other half completed their master's degree. Of the three who completed a doctorate degree, two spoke to the positive

influence of their doctorate program on their leadership development, and of the impact of the instructors on their decision to pursue the superintendency. Additionally, the two participants who spoke the most about their doctorate program also shared that their networks grew because of their participation in a doctorate program. In contrast, the other half of the participants who completed their master's degree did not share specific evidence of impact from their program, other than meeting the minimum requirements necessary for their continued ascension in school leadership. While all six participants emphasized the value in growing their political acumen and relationship-building skills through informal interactions, four participants in particular shared specific examples of learning how to foster their political and relational skills through informal interactions with colleagues and family members. The findings for this first theme indicate that aspiring leaders need to pay close and strategic attention to their preparation, in both formal and informal settings. Finally, diversifying instructional leadership experience with non-instructional experiences will benefit future superintendents.

Chapter 6: The Search and Selection Process

To further understand how the women of color in this study rose to the superintendency, it is necessary to further explore and understand from the participants' perspective how the search process works, understand the role of search consultants in a search, and recognize the impact of the board dynamics on the search process. The following chapter reveals three key findings under this second theme of the search and selection process. These findings will also help to answer my second research question: How does a woman's specific racial ethnic background get reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency?

The first finding is focused on understanding the processes of the search. This includes the two sub-findings related to the challenges and opportunities connected to the search. The second finding focuses on the role of search consultants, with three sub-findings around the construction of the leadership profile, the preliminary screening, and the authority search consultants have in positioning candidates in front of the board. Finally, the third finding addresses the board dynamics and its impact on the search process. Table 5 illustrates the findings and sample quotes for this chapter.

Finding 1: The Search and Selection Process Had Both Challenges and Opportunities

What the search and selection process entailed was one of the salient findings that emerged under this theme around the search. Two sub-findings include understanding the challenges of the search and selection process and recognizing the opportunities available to women of color applicants during the search process. The surprising sub-finding from the participants centers around the opportunities available to women of color during the search process. I will go into greater details in the sub-findings in the next sub-sections.

The Challenge of Inside Candidates vs. Outside Candidates

In Kamler's 2009 research, she asserted that inside candidates applying for a superintendent job have a more difficult process than outside candidates, and the consultants interviewed for her research "cautioned women from staying in a district too long with the hope of succeeding the superintendent" (p. 135). While all participants recounted some challenges associated with the search and selection process, Maria Sanchez spoke in great detail around the challenges she experienced, given her early tenure.

Some people [board members] felt like there's got to be somebody better than me out there. "It can't possibly be Maria who could be our superintendent." And I knew it, but I thought to myself, they haven't gotten to know me very well, because I've been the associate superintendent and they haven't worked with me. And [yet] as they worked with me as [the interim] superintendent, they saw my style of communication and everything. Yet, they still said, "Well, maybe, but there has gotta be somebody better out there."

Table 5

Summary of Findings for Research Question 2: How Does a Woman's Specific Racial Ethnic Background Get Reflected in Challenges and Opportunities for the Superintendency?

Main Findings	Sample Quotes
<p>The challenges and opportunities in the search and selection process may pose a challenge for inside women of color candidates, but it also provides for plentiful opportunities for women of color candidates to stand out.</p>	<p>“Maria, it's going to be very competitive. There will be many applicants that have already been superintendents and there will be some applicants that are in associate superintendent positions that are going to be very qualified. It's tough when you're an internal candidate, it's tougher. I think it's great that you are going to apply, but be prepared in case. (Superintendent Maria Sanchez, Case Study 1)</p> <p>“Don't let gender, ethnicity, or race be [discouraging] factors. Because you're a female, you're going to work twice as hard. You already know that. But you know what, because of that, you have an <i>advantage</i>. You worked twice as hard, you learned twice as much, you gained twice as much experience. You have an advantage.” (Search Consultant Maggie Rodriguez, Case Study 7)</p>
<p>The role of search consultants is to construct a leadership profile, conduct preliminary screenings of viable candidates, and position candidates in front of the board.</p>	<p>“As a search consultant, we meet with the board and we go through everything. We look at everything including will the board be amenable to internal candidates. And then we lay out the whole input-gathering process. We interview each of the board members. [We meet with focus groups like] the cabinet, leadership, teacher groups, classified, the business sector, faith based, and if [the district has high schools] high school students. There's usually an online survey that thousands have the opportunity to respond to that is compiled separately. [The board gets to see it all], everyone's views and their ratings. And then we analyze the written input from the various sessions. So those three things compile the leadership profile report where seven or eight desired characteristics are identified for what the board wants to see in a candidate.” (Search Consultant Maggie Rodriguez, Case Study 7)</p> <p>“I considered the important role that the consultants have in both reaching out and selecting potential candidates and then positioning those candidates with a school board. And it's not the role of a consultant to advocate for any individual, but [it] is the role of the consultant to make sure that they bring a diverse team forward to the board. Sometimes the boards actually ask for as diverse of a team as the consultants can identify. But again, it's the consultant who is in a position to screen, conduct some pre-interviews, and determine who should be recommended to that school board. So it's such an important role . . . as I could help boards identify individuals and give them a rich pool of diverse individuals to select from.” (Search Consultant Norma Flores, Case Study 8)</p>
<p>The composition of the board and politics of the board impact the search and selection process.</p>	<p>“What will matter is the board. What they do will matter to me. Who the board president is will matter. Who the executive board is will matter. So, we'll see.” (Superintendent Harriet Young, Case Study 3)</p>

At the time of her application, Maria believed her insider status to be a strength. Gullo and Sperandio (2020) called this the optimal career path, where “assistant superintendents aspiring to the superintendency typically considered the insider career path most optimal for acquiring a superintendent position based mainly on interpersonal factors within their current district such as reputation and relationships, which is consistent with the findings” (p. 8). In addition, Maria stepped up and offered to serve as interim superintendent when her district superintendent suddenly resigned in the middle of the school year. However, Maria was surprised to experience the extensive and rigorous process the board required for her to be selected as their final candidate for the position. In addition, Maria followed the advice of her mentor and called the search consultants leading the superintendent search prior to her submitting her application, to let them know she was interested in applying. The two male search consultants responded with:

Maria, it’s going to be very competitive. There will be many applicants that have already been superintendents and there will be some applicants that are in associate superintendent positions that are going to be very qualified. It’s tough when you’re an internal candidate, it’s tougher. I think it’s great that you are going to apply, but be prepared in case.

This surprising sub-finding from Maria’s experience substantiates the insider phenomenon: women of color insider candidates have it tougher than outside candidates in the search and selection process (Kamler, 2009). This is surprising because most would think insiders have the advantages over outsiders, especially if they have a successful track record of producing high-quality work. However, in Maria’s example, she did not have a majority support in the beginning of the process, and in fact, her board wanted to see as many qualified candidates as possible. Furthermore, the board conducted extensive background checks of Maria to ensure Maria had very few, if any, flaws, that would jeopardize their decision should they agree to offer her the position. This extensive background check for Maria did not occur for her predecessor, who is a white male, and who also served as an interim superintendent. In fact, the board did not require him to go through the search and selection process; they simply appointed him. This intersection of insider candidacy and race and gender for women of color leaders suggests that boards and systems hold continued bias against women of color. Search consultant Maggie Rodriguez confirmed this bias, and pointed out that this bias even exists within one’s own social group.

So now gender wise, there are boards who have, even with female Hispanic board members, have a tendency to want to go with men superintendents. Cultural. Annoying. And then Hispanic men obviously will do the same.

In comparison, superintendent Olga Huezo, from case study two, shared her experience with the search process:

We have a rule in the organization that every management position is posted and everybody has access to it. So it was really important for me that the board do a national search because I felt like the best person should be hired for the organization, and that I

should not be given the position, given there may be somebody out there that is better or more experienced. So that is the course that they [the board] went on.

Olga also served as interim superintendent for a few months because of the sudden resignation of her superintendent. When the job was posted, she applied for the job—although, different from Maria, she was tapped by her board to apply for the position. While she did not specifically detail the rigorous process she went through, she did express an appreciation for the board's expectation of conducting a nationwide search and selection process, similar to what most school districts do when hiring for a superintendent. In contrast to Maria's experience, Olga's experience did not feel as painful because Olga's board did not deviate from their normal search and selection processes, whereas Maria's board did.

Both women were insider candidates, both are Latina women with Latino/Latina board members, and both served as interim superintendents prior to their final selection as superintendents. The difference is Olga was tapped to apply and Maria was not, and Olga serves a large urban school district whereas Maria serves a rural school district. However, Maria had a majority Latino board and Olga did not, at the time of hire. Perhaps Maria's board was cautious and did not want to appear to favor members of their group (Ortiz, 2000).

The Opportunity to Demonstrate Your Emotional Intelligence and Professional Experience

Both search consultants, Maggie Rodriguez and Norma Flores, shared advice specific to women and women of color. Norma noted that should a woman make it past the paper screening and the first interviews, and find herself in the final round of interviews, she should highlight her emotional intelligence and people skills. Norma, who also serves as a prestigious university professor, noted,

If you're a woman and you get to that final interview and you were up against a group of white men, you might get the job because women tend to outperform in some of the people-oriented aspects of leadership. The relationship-building, the caring, the ability to really demonstrate their interest in people and in partnerships.

Maggie also advised women to connect to their ability to establish positive relationships as a result of having strong people skills.

The number one thing is being able to establish good relationships. Superintendents aren't let go for instructional leadership matters. It's when they don't get along with people that relationships become fractured. They're not out in the community. They're not forming relationships with the local government. They're sort of keeping to their office, and they're just not stepping out there. That's one of the things that I think is really at the crux of successful superintendency, and being able to establish good relationships with the board.

She added that applicants should take advantage of the opportunity to talk about the ways their strong people skills lead to positive relationships within an organization. In addition, Maggie advocated for aspiring female superintendents to showcase the extensive skills and strategies they have had to learn because of their gender. She calls this the true advantage women have, because they have needed to prove their worth and have had to work twice as hard as their male

counterparts. For example, recall Maria's example, in which she had to prove her worthiness as the district's superintendent by going through a rigorous search and selection process that her predecessor, a white male, did not have to go through. Maggie encourages women of color to see the positive side of their gender and race.

Don't let gender, ethnicity, or race be [discouraging] factors. Because you're a female, you're going to work twice as hard. You already know that. But you know what, because of that, you have an *advantage*. You worked twice as hard, you learned twice as much, you gained twice as much experience. You have an advantage.

Norma advises women of color aspirants to talk specifically about how they have supported the work of keeping their current board apprised of critical topics. For example, candidates have likely presented numerous board presentations and gathered information for their superintendent's communication with the board.

If you're a senior leader, you're presenting to the board, right? You're giving a presentation, whether it's on the budget, or it's on an HR issue, or it's on an instructional issue. You have learned how to present. . . . Also, you may be providing information so that the superintendent may pass that to the board. So you can identify that and call it out in your interview.

Participants shared rich data around the challenges and opportunities associated with the search and selection process. These insights could help future leaders to prepare to apply for their first superintendent position.

Finding 2: The Role of Search Consultants in Constructing the Leadership Profile, Conducting Prescreenings, and Positioning Candidates

Both search consultant participants, Maggie Rodriguez and Norma Flores, spoke extensively about their role and responsibilities as search consultants. Both discussed helping the community to construct a leadership profile containing desired characteristics for the next superintendent. They also conduct preliminary screenings of all applicants. Finally, they have the responsibility of positioning viable candidates in front of the school board for interviews. The section below provides more detailed descriptions for each of the sub-findings.

Constructing the Leadership Profile

Both consultants spoke of the multiple meetings with the board and community members necessary to construct a leadership profile for the superintendent best suited for the district. This profile is typically used as a road map for the consultants (Kamler, 2009). The sample leadership profile in Figure 10 demonstrates the correlation of the data gathered from the participants of this study as compared to what is advertised in a leadership profile for vacant superintendent position. Additionally, both consultants spoke of the three steps necessary to construct the leadership profile: individual meetings with the board members, focus group meetings, and a collection of data gathered from the community via an online survey. Maggie shared the following regarding the three steps:

As a search consultant, we meet with the board and we go through everything. We look at everything including will the board be amenable to internal candidates. And then we lay out the whole input-gathering process. We interview each of the board members. [We meet with focus groups like] the cabinet, leadership, teacher groups, classified, the business sector, faith based, and if [the district has high schools] high school students. There's usually an online survey that thousands have the opportunity to respond to that is compiled separately. [The board gets to see it all], everyone's views and their ratings. And then we analyze the written input from the various sessions. So those three things compile the leadership profile report where seven or eight desired characteristics are identified for what the board wants to see in a candidate.

An example of a leadership profile can be seen in Figure 10.


Preliminary Screenings of Applicants

After a leadership profile is constructed and published, along with a timeline, the recruitment and preliminary screenings of potential candidates begins. Both consultants mentioned the importance of consultants' role and responsibilities in screening applicants prior to positioning them in front of the board. This screening may include conducting one-to-one phone conversations, preliminary background checks, and even a preliminary video interview to get a better feel for the candidate and their fit for the community, as well as within what's been described in the leadership profile. Maggie described what these screenings look like:

We do pre-interviewing with those that most closely match the seven to eight characteristics [of the leadership profile]. So we'll Zoom for example, and it's interesting [how] presence comes across. You know if one makes it to the first round interviews, the paperwork is all fine and some initial confidential pre-reference checking happens. The track record of the individual and not a lot of movement [is important]. We're looking for a stable candidate who has stayed in places long enough to form a track record.

Maggie shared that the active recruitment and screening of applicants is a major part of her role as a search consultant. Because search consultants have the primary responsibility of bringing highly qualified candidates to the board for interview, Maggie recommends that interested candidates reach out to the assigned search consultants to express their interest. This allows interested candidates to ask consultants specific questions they might have about the district, the board, and about the role in relation to the community. This action also helps diminish the gatekeeping described in the literature, as shared in Chapter 2. Consultants are often retired superintendents and, therefore, mainly white males. By reaching out to consultants beforehand, aspiring women leaders of color can position their diversity as a strength with consultants, a trait that can be of benefit to the aspirant as more boards are looking for diverse candidates. Additionally, Maggie advises aspiring superintendents to "get in touch with the consultant and send them your resume and have a brief phone conversation with them about what you would like to look at and what you will be sending them ahead of time."

Figure 10
Leadership Profile (Not Associated With Any of the Case Studies)



LIVERMORE
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Information for Applicants for the Position of

SUPERINTENDENT

LIVERMORE VALLEY JOINT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

THE POSITION

The Board of Education of the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District invites highly qualified educational leaders to apply for the position of District Superintendent. The Board welcomes a diverse group of candidates.

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

The Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District seeks a superintendent who:

- Should possess prior teaching or school-related experience to understand the challenges and nuances of education.
- An in-depth understanding of best instructional practices to drive academic achievement and student success.
- Has demonstrated success with diverse student populations, ensuring equitable outcomes for all learners.
- Is fearless in utilizing data to drive decision-making and hold stakeholders accountable for student outcomes.
- Possesses excellent interpersonal skills paired with strong communication abilities to engage effectively with diverse stakeholders.
- Has a proven ability to provide strong instructional leadership, guiding teachers and staff towards academic excellence.
- Is a visionary leader capable of seeing beyond the immediate school ecosystem to support all students and foster strategic partnerships within the community.
- Upholds impeccable ethical standards, ensuring integrity and transparency in all actions and decisions.
- Has experience in managing facilities and bonds, coupled with fiscal acumen to ensure efficient resource allocation.

PERSONAL PROFILE

The Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District seeks a superintendent who:

- Is passionate about education and committed to driving positive change within the district.
- Is a student-centered leader dedicated to prioritizing the needs and success of every student.
- Is a collaborative leader who values diversity and inclusivity, fostering a culture of trust and collaboration.
- Is transparent and honest in communication, fostering trust and credibility among stakeholders.
- Engages actively with the community, building strong relationships and investing in partnerships.
- Demonstrates empathy and care towards students, staff, and the community, creating a supportive environment.
- Is a courageous leader unafraid to innovate and make difficult decisions to advance the district's mission.
- Holds oneself and others accountable, guided by integrity and a commitment to ethical leadership.

Page 1 of 3

Figure 10 (continued)
Leadership Profile (Not Associated With Any of the Case Studies)

DESIRED EDUCATION/EXPERIENCE (PREFERRED)

- Master's degree or higher with a record of continuous learning (Doctorate preferable)
- Experience as a teacher, principal and at least three years' experience at the executive cabinet level. Superintendent experience desirable
- A strong fiscal background and understanding of state and local budgets
- A record of focusing on students and innovative practices while improving achievement for all
- A strong record of partnering with the board, staff community groups

SELECTION PROCESS

The Board of Education has retained Consultants Jacqueline Horejs, Ed.D. and Eric Andrew, Ed.D. of Leadership Associates to recruit qualified candidates. The consultants will screen applications and recommend candidates to the Board for interviews and further consideration. The Board will have the opportunity to review all applications submitted. Any contact with board members, in an attempt to influence the selection process, will be considered a breach of professional ethics. Finalists will have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the community and schools. Board members reserve the right to visit the District and communities of a candidate prior to a final decision.

SALARY AND CONTRACT

The salary will be competitive and based upon qualifications and experience.

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

To be considered, the candidate must provide:

- A letter of introduction
- A fully completed application form
- A resume
- Three current letters of recommendation (within the past twelve months)
- Verification of degrees and credentials (finalists only)

All materials will be acknowledged and treated confidentially

THE DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY

Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District (LVJUSD) is an award-winning district that serves more than 13,000 students in transitional kindergarten through 12th grade at nine elementary campuses, two K-8 schools, three middle schools, two comprehensive high schools, and two alternative schools. The District features International Baccalaureate Programs, Green Engineering Academy, Dual Immersion Program and Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM) pathways.

The District's Mission Statement, "Each student will graduate with the skills needed to contribute and thrive in a changing world," sets the district apart and drives their daily work. Dedicated employees work together with the Board of Trustees to create a nurturing environment for all students to succeed. Throughout the district, there is a shared, unwavering commitment to continuous improvement. Students are instructed in communication and collaboration skills to work as a team, and cultivate the creativity, tenacity, and critical thinking necessary to solve the problems of the future. Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District is a destination district!

Figure 10 (continued)
Leadership Profile (Not Associated With Any of the Case Studies)

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Emily Prusso, President
Kristie Wang, Clerk
Craig Bueno, Member
Steven Drouin, Member
Yanira Guzmán, Member

The Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District is an equal opportunity employer.

APPLICATION PROCESS AND DEADLINE

To request application materials for the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District Superintendent position, please visit <http://www.leadershipassociates.org/active-searches/> and select the listing for this position.

Applications must be completed and returned via email by 5:00 P.M. on May 18, 2024

Consultants:

Jacqueline Horejs, Ed.D.
Eric Andrew, Ed.D.

Leadership Associates

449 W. Foothill Blvd., #427
Glendora, CA 91741
www.leadershipassociates.org

For general information, contact:
Linda Harter, Search Support Specialist
lharter@leadershipassociates.org

While Maggie advises aspiring superintendents to reach out to consultants prior to submitting an application, she also admitted to the bias consultants may have. “They still have the lens of their former superintendency.” She described the networks she and other consultants are expected to maintain. In fact, it is these very networks that adds value to a consultant, and often is a major factor for boards when selecting search firms. For example, Maggie has access to the national association for Latino administrators and superintendents, an attractive selling point for school boards.

Positioning Candidates in Front of the Board

The last sub-finding related to the role of search consultants is perhaps the most important, and certainly the toughest role for the consultants as shared by both participating consultants from this study. They both reflected on their role as needing to bring forward the most qualified and viable candidates in front of the board, to ensure the board has the opportunity to interview the very best candidates, in terms of qualifications and fit for their district. This final step serves as the marker for the gatekeeping authority search consultants have in the search and selection process for superintendents.

Norma understands what the search and selection process entails, but more importantly, emphasized the value of the search consultants in diversifying the pool of candidates to be positioned in front of boards. She contended that consultants may be leveraged to support equitable access to the superintendency. This is in alignment with Kamler’s 2009 research. Kamler (2009) shared that “although chemistry appeared to ‘seal the deal,’ consultants in both studies acted as gatekeepers of the process, the people, and the pertinent information and in general controlled the search by formulating the final slate of candidates for the board to interview, thereby wielding a powerful influence in the selection of a new superintendent” (p. 132). Norma underscored the value of search consultants and the ways they may support a more diverse pool of candidates:

I considered the important role that the consultants have in both reaching out and selecting potential candidates and then positioning those candidates with a school board. And it’s not the role of a consultant to advocate for any individual, but [it] is the role of the consultant to make sure that they bring a diverse team forward to the board. Sometimes the boards actually ask for as diverse of a team as the consultants can identify. But again, it’s the consultant who is in a position to screen, conduct some pre-interviews, and determine who should be recommended to that school board. So it’s such an important role. . . . as I could help boards identify individuals and give them a rich pool of diverse individuals to select from.

Finding 3: The Impact of the Composition and Politics of the Board on the Search and Selection Process

Finally, both of the search consultants and three of the six superintendent participants spoke about understanding board dynamics and their impact on the search and selection process. Specifically, participants mentioned the importance of board composition and shared that they had to learn the current board politics and would advise applicants to study a district and its politics deeply before applying. Harriet, the interim superintendent who was appointed permanent superintendent after my research interview, responded with the following when I asked her if she planned to apply for the permanent superintendent position:

What will matter is the board. What they do will matter to me. Who the board president is will matter. Who the executive board is will matter. So, we'll see.

Harriet further expanded upon her comments by saying that the majority of the board members in her district are of color serving in a district where the majority of students are of color. She further stated that she believed they were looking for a superintendent who would mirror the demographics of the students and families as well as the board's values. After my interview with Harriet, her board declined to hire any of the search firms who sent in a proposal to lead the search. In fact, the board made a decision to appoint Harriet without her needing to go through the search and selection process.

Chapter Summary

The results from this chapter reveal three critical findings related to the search process: how the search process works, the role of search consultants in a search, and the impact of the board dynamics on the search process. The search is influenced by the search and selection process, which includes challenges and opportunities for women of color candidates. Four of the six superintendent participants were insider applicants and expressed challenges with perception and assumptions as insider candidates. However, opportunities also existed because of their knowledge, experience and relationships within their current organization. The second set of findings revealed search consultants serve a critical role, and therefore as gatekeepers, in constructing a leadership profile, conducting preliminary screenings of viable candidates, and positioning a slate of candidates in front of the board. Thus, as gathered by the two search consultant participants, it is important for women of color candidates and/or internal candidates to proactively reach out to search consultants during the search process. One thing is certain with regard to these findings: aspiring women of color wishing to serve in the superintendency must recognize how these findings intersect with their race and gender, and recognize that with work in advance, they have the ability to not only land an interview but to also receive an offer of employment.

Chapter 7: The Resilience Factors That Allow Women of Color to Thrive in Their Role as Superintendent

Engaging in ongoing conversations with women of color who have broken through the glass ceiling is critical to illuminate the resilient factors that allow these women to thrive in their roles as superintendent. All six superintendent participants spoke to the complex and nuanced challenges of the superintendency and also spoke to the skills, strategies, and support systems they engaged in to remain resilient. In particular, they spoke of their ability to learn from and work through complex issues within a complex governance structure with board members in their districts. Their ability to adapt and move with agility based upon the demands of them as leaders is evidence of their ability to “developmentally mature when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity” (Reed & Blaine, 2015, p.460).

Participants in this study reported various factors that supported their resilience. Two sets of findings emerged from the participants: the resilient leadership skills and values necessary to lead successfully as a superintendent and the support systems necessary to help them thrive as leaders. These findings will help to answer my third research question: What skills, strategies, and supports have contributed to the success of women of color in the superintendency? The findings are outlined in Table 6.

Finding 1: Effective Communication, Quick Decision-Making, Knowing When to Seek Assistance, and Valuing Students Are Necessary to Buffer Against Adversity

In reflecting on their ascension to the position of superintendent, each participant cited the leadership actions necessary to support them to be successful. From the findings, I will lift four specific examples as shared below, which highlight the leadership skills of effective communication, quick decision-making, knowing when to seek assistance, and the value of centering students in all leadership decisions.

The Leadership Skills of Effective Communication and Quick Decision-Making

All participants remarked on the leadership action skills necessary to lead effectively, particularly under stress and uncertainty. In the context of this research study, I define *leadership action skills* as the skills the leader already has and knows how to regularly assert in order to support their own success and thereby the success of others around them. These skills are identified as communication skills and decision-making skills. All participants spoke to these skills as necessary to successfully lead. Irene Kim reflected that

Communication skills and organizational skills are paramount. You’re hired because of your brain, your vision, your ideas, your relationships. You’re not the one building the ship but you’re the one that has to convey the idea of what that ship looks like and convey the destination that you’re heading towards.

Table 6

Summary of Findings for Research Question 3: What Skills, Strategies, and Supports Have Contributed to the Success of Women of Color in the Superintendency?

Main Findings	Sample Quotes
The resilience leadership skills and values necessary to lead successfully as a superintendent	<p>“Communication skills and organizational skills are paramount. You’re hired because of your brain, your vision, your ideas, your relationships. You’re not the one building the ship but you’re the one that has to convey the idea of what that ship looks like and convey the destination that you’re heading towards.” (Superintendent Irene Kim, Case Study 5)</p> <p>“And so I had to call her up afterwards, talk her down, and say, these are some of the reasons as to why your colleagues are saying this. And so she eventually understood it.” (Superintendent Harriet Young, Case Study 3)</p> <p>“So I had the head of FCMAT who literally tutored me and showed me how to read [school finance reports]. He was like, call me, because they couldn’t afford for the district to go belly up again.”(Superintendent Angela Jones, Case Study 4)</p> <p>“So I had to have a lot of conversations with Paul and told him I talked to Mike [the board president]. I had to ask Mike for help.” (Superintendent Maria Sanchez, Case Study 1)</p> <p>“I gotta get comfortable really quickly and be okay with people who don’t like me and may not agree with me on everything. . . . And I think sometimes, particularly as women and women of color, we get caught up in we’ve got to be liked by our community. We’ve got to have this fan base. And that’s not what this role is.” (Superintendent Angela Jones, Case Study 4)</p>
The support systems necessary to thrive as a leader	<p>“My boss at the high school where I went to as an AP [was critical because] I’ve never been at a high school [before]. To this day he and I are very, very good friends. He helped me politically with how to be the first black woman at that high school, of which there were only two in the city but ours was a prestigious kind of high school. [He helped me] to navigate those waters.” (Superintendent Harriet Young, Case Study 3)</p> <p>“Build a network of intentional supports, to try to create that support system that many women, even those that are in the role and are successful, didn’t necessarily have.” (Superintendent Angela Jones, Case Study 4)</p> <p>“Dr. John Montgomery [pseudonym] has always been so supportive of me from the time he came to the organization. I was a director and I had a direct line of communication to him. I was included in a lot of things, and it gave me a lot of opportunities. He continues to coach me and mentor me.” (Superintendent Olga Huevo, Case Study 2)</p>

Irene's reflections highlight the nuanced leadership action skills necessary when it comes to communicating within a large and complex organization. Superintendents are responsible to many stakeholders and thus must have the skills to communicate their vision. This communication may be in public with a large audience or with smaller groups of audiences in more intimate settings. Either way, a superintendent must be able to convey their vision and direction for their district.

A second example of a leadership action comes from Harriet Young, who explained how she made the decision to follow up in a personal coaching conversation with a board member, to support the board member's understanding of why the other board members had disagreed with her on a sensitive issue during an open public board meeting.

At our board meeting, one of our board members made a statement about what [a neighboring board had taken action on] and she wanted us to send a statement to our community [about this same topic]. Other board members [disagreed] and were like, we've done enough, we don't need to poke the bear, let's not do this. And so I had to call her up afterwards, talk her down, and say, these are some of the reasons as to why your colleagues are saying this. And so she eventually understood it.

Different from Irene's more general analysis, Harriet provided a specific example of a time she took action. Harriet's immediate contact and conversation with this board member not only helped the board member to understand her colleagues' perspective, but also helped the board to remain united on a sensitive topic for their community. Harriet's leadership action through her decision-making helped to unite her board with a sensitive and public topic, and therefore, helped her board's leadership for their community.

The Leadership Skill of Knowing When to Seek Assistance

All participants remarked on the ability to seek assistance when needed, especially so they can build their resilience through the learning and guidance from someone providing help. Superintendent Angela Jones spoke about how she needed to learn school finance quickly in her first year because she had inherited a district filled with financial woes.

So I literally had to learn from zero to 100 in the first year, which was really challenging. This district is about to go into bankruptcy. So I had the head of FCMAT who literally tutored me and showed me how to read [school finance reports]. He was like, call me, because they couldn't afford for the district to go belly up again.

While Angela weathered her first year, the surprising detail she shared that may not be well known to aspiring leaders is that many people are willing to help and want to see superintendents and school districts succeed. In this case, the head of FCMAT, which is California's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, personally offered to assist Angela to understand her school finances so that she was able to prevent her district from being taken over by the state for poor financial status.

A second example centers on Maria Sanchez. Maria found herself caught in the middle of politics because of the exclusionary statement read aloud by one of her board members against a marginalized community during a public board meeting. The statement caused an uproar and one

other board member in particular wanted to censure the offending board member. Maria found herself caught between feuding board members and asked for help from her board president.

Paul [board member pseudonym] wanted to censure Mary [board member pseudonym]. So I had to have a lot of conversations with Paul and told him I talked to Mike [the board president]. I had to ask Mike for help. Mike helped . . . and then Paul didn't have support [to continue to demand the public censure of Mary]. So then it finally quieted down.

Maria's quick action to seek help from her board president minimized the noise of the feuding board members and helped keep the focus on students and student achievement. Maria was trying to focus her board on the work of supporting students, which is described further in the next section. In the next set of sub-findings, I highlight more about what this looks like and what the superintendents' strategies are to keep the focus on students.

The Leadership Value of Centering Students in All Decisions

All superintendents shared an example of a moment when their leadership was tested because of an unpopular decision they made. In each case, the superintendent shared that the decisions made always came back to their values centered on students. Olga Huezo explained that doing what is easy may not always be what's best for the organization and students.

I really believe you can't do this job to keep the job. I know the easier thing is to say yes to people that want what they want to not have noise in the boardroom or to not have people in communities upset with you. But I think there are a lot of unintended consequences if you lead that way that would be detrimental to the organization. And so we've always done really hard things because they are what's going to change outcomes for students. . . . I decided very early on that I wasn't going to do this job to try and keep the job and that I had to do what I thought was right. And if it meant having to say no to the school board, or to a constituent group that was very powerful, I was prepared to do that and potentially lose my job over it.

Olga added additional context by sharing that she made a decision during the COVID pandemic to take the time necessary to listen to her staff and community through focused listening sessions, and because of this, took longer to bring staff and students back into the school buildings. Olga's values were centered on the impact of mental health for both students and staff, and thus she wanted to hear from them before acting.

Some of my staff wanted me to order the teachers back. And, you know, the board was prepared to do that. And while I knew that, we could probably weather that, I also knew it was really going to create tension with labor that I think would be detrimental to the organization. . . . so I made the choice to take a little bit longer to try and really understand what were all the concerns. I don't regret that decision. But it did come with a lot of tension between myself and my team.

Olga's example depicts the isolation of the superintendency. However, when the decisions made are centered with students in mind, these tough decisions help the superintendent to build resilience.

Similarly, superintendent Angela Jones shared an example of a time when she made a tough decision, resulting in her receiving much public criticism, but felt the decision was made in the best interest of students.

At the meeting [where] the board decided [to close a school I recommended], I had Black women teachers coming up to me, [calling out] "sell out," and all that stuff. Then later when I went to the school, the same teacher [came up to me and said], "Now I understand what you're trying to do." I think those are just some of the skills that you've got to learn early on or you can't lead courageously.

In this example, Angela owned her decision to create better opportunities for students by closing a school and redirecting students to a different school. With school closures, Angela received much criticism from internal and external stakeholders. However, because she did not waver from her value of ensuring all students receive the best opportunities available to them, by holding steadfast to her vision despite the criticism from community members, one very critical member acknowledged Angela's decision-making, and expressed her understanding for Angela's decision. Angela shared that in keeping steadfast to her values, she was able to go through with a tough decision that helped students to have better opportunities elsewhere. She also reflected on accepting that people might not like her, an area of discomfort for many.

I gotta get comfortable really quickly and be okay with people who don't like me and may not agree with me on everything. . . . And I think sometimes, particularly as women and women of color, we get caught up in, we've got to be liked by our community. We've got to have this fan base. And that's not what this role is.

Through both Angela's and Olga's student-centered vision for their communities and in spite of the community pressure they received, sticking to their values helped them to keep their resolve and strengthen their resilience.

Finding 2: Mentors, Sponsors, and Networks Are Necessary Support Systems

The second findings center the support systems the participants reported as helping them to thrive as leaders. The first support system encompasses the mentors and sponsors the superintendents were grateful to have as a sounding board and thought partner. The second system includes the networks all of the superintendents had formed and maintained.

Mentors and Sponsors Are Often Found Before the Superintendency

All six superintendents mentioned the support of mentors and sponsors who significantly contributed to their ascension to the superintendency. While not all superintendents used the term "mentor" or "sponsor," they all mentioned at least one relationship with someone they called supportive or described as a sounding board, who helped them to think through specific situations and persevere through difficult times by listening and advising. To distinguish the difference between mentor and sponsor, I used Ang's (2018) research which defines a mentor as

“a neutral kind of person who is there to help you in any kind of way—he or she is there to listen, to observe and to play back and to paraphrase what you are going through in your life and work. A mentor is almost like a mirror to help you deal with whatever you are going through” (p. 39). In addition, Ang (2018) defined sponsors as those who “invest and are senior leaders who are committed to somebody’s career success” (p. 39). To further elaborate, sponsors first invest the time, effort and resources to prepare their protege for top roles. When she is ready for the next big role, sponsors often go “out on a limb” to advocate and champion for their protege. Because sponsors are senior leaders with power and influence, they are able to leverage their political clout to open doors and drive decisions in the protege’s favor (Ang, 2018). With these distinguishing differences, the below is an example of what Harriet’s first of many mentors did for her:

My boss at the high school where I went to as an AP [was critical because] I’ve never been at a high school [before]. To this day he and I are very, very good friends. He helped me politically with how to be the first Black woman at that high school, of which there were only two in the city but ours was a prestigious kind of high school. [He helped me] to navigate those waters.

Harriet’s mentor coached her through two critical areas. First, she shared that the assignment was her first assignment at the high school level. The principal mentored her and helped her to learn the work as a high school administrator. Second, he helped her think and lead through racial and gendered politics. This continues to be an area of learning for Harriet as she navigates the role of superintendency. Harriet expressed a deep love for this mentor and for all those who have helped her because these

key critical people beside me poured into me [and I did not] understand or know because I just thought that they were either my bosses or they were part of my family. But now I know that it was all part of a plan to get me to where I am now.

Harriet met this particular mentor early in her career, before her superintendency, and has kept their trusting mentor/mentee relationship intact all these years.

Superintendent Irene Kim, at first, struggled with answering the questions around mentors and sponsors. However, upon further reflection, she shared,

Okay, let me go back a little bit, I will say that there was one person that I felt was probably the closest to a mentor that I’ve ever had was Dr. Levi’s wife, Lisa Levi [pseudonym]. But she was on my dissertation committee when I did my doctorate. So she probably was the closest person that I did have to being a mentor. Eventually, I kind of thought of her as a second mom. She took care of me through my dissertation process, and then afterwards, she was one that I did seek advice from when I was applying for superintendent jobs.

Irene was hesitant about identifying someone and thought back to when she was in graduate school, completing her doctoral work. Both Irene’s and Harriet’s authentic revelations provide the surprising element to this sub-finding: mentors and sponsors are often found well in

advance of the superintendency. Olga Huezo also shared an example of a tie to a mentors who has been in her professional life a long time prior to her appointment to the superintendency:

Dr. Harris (pseudonym), he's African American, and has always been so supportive of me from the time he came to the organization. I was a director and I had a direct line of communication to him. I was included in a lot of things, [and he] gave me a lot of opportunities and continues to coach me and mentor me now. And he's been, you know, not my boss for nine years. But we still have a very close relationship.

Finally, Angela Jones also talked about the many mentors and sponsors she had, specifically mentioning the sponsor who served as her superintendent two tenures before her superintendency and took her under his wing while she was a central office administrator and continued to do so as a superintendent.

I had Michael Thomas (pseudonym), who really sponsored me in terms of helping me to understand how to negotiate a contract. He connected me with a lot of his network so that I would have people to call, and he coached me for free for the first two years. He really helped me just to understand the political complexity of the Boerne School District. And, you know, how to understand what the role of a superintendent is. I don't think I would be able to be in this position as long had it not been for him.

In addition, two of the six superintendent participants mentioned only male mentors and sponsors. As such, I asked Angela if she had female mentors and sponsors and if she felt she had a disproportionate number of male mentors and sponsors to female mentors and sponsors. She shared the following:

I think some of that is simply, from a mathematical standpoint, in education as you start to get into the leadership roles, and even in 2023, it is predominantly white. When I'm in California convenings for superintendents, black women are like 2.4% of superintendencies in California. So it's still a very white dominated space. So it makes sense from a numbers perspective that if you're trying to break into these places, at some point, you're going to have a white male sponsor.

All six superintendents interviewed shared names of mentors and sponsors, and the most surprising common denominator was that all of these mentors had been in the superintendent's professional life well before the superintendency. This suggests the importance of aspiring superintendents maintaining relationships with their current mentors, knowing that those relationships will likely continue to be valuable as they progress through their career paths.

“Start Building Your Own Network”

Participants discussed the value of having their own networks. Maggie Rodriguez, one of the search consultant participants, advised aspiring superintendents to “start building your own network.” While not all participants named these influential circles of contacts “networks,” all of them described a group of individuals whom they would call regularly to exchange ideas, share employment opportunities, talk through best practices, and generally connect with as system leaders. Participants also shared they asked their networks questions, and used each other as a

sounding board. By asking questions and bouncing ideas off of one another, they helped each other to avoid landmines. These networks strengthened their success and resilience. Additionally, Angela Jones advised the importance of a diverse network, which she calls her “kitchen cabinet.”

You’ve got to develop that back kitchen, [and it’s] what I call a kitchen cabinet. You know, it is really seeking out different types of people. Some of them might be superintendents, some of them might be elected officials, some of them might be former board members, some of them might be former union leaders, some of them might be faith-based leaders, some of them might be trusted principals, teachers, or parents. You’ve got to be able to develop tentacles in different areas. You start off in your district, in your community, and I also have them at the state level and at the national level too. So when you are hit with certain things, you have folks that you can call.

The diversity in networks is important for superintendents because of the highly charged, complex, and political work they lead. In contrast, it’s also important to have networks in a special area, particularly areas that may not be an area of strength. Olga Huezo, the longest sitting superintendent with nine years in the position, advised the following:

Make sure that you have awareness of the areas that are not a strength for you. . . . and then seek opportunities to be part of networks that will help you build your capacity and your understanding. I was on the FCMAT board, so that was also helpful for me. I [also] did the Broad Superintendent’s Academy, so I had access to modules and people that could help me in those [school finance] areas.

Finally, networks are also formed due to similar backgrounds and shared interests. Harriet spoke about a network of administrators she worked with, from within her region, although not in the same exact job title. Harriet’s network includes professionals with similar positionalities and aspirations, and who were at one point within the same organization. While most of her networks are located in the same region, many of her network contacts have moved on to other regions. However, she is still very close with all of them and remarked on the start of her relationship with one of her closest contacts in this particular network:

He was one of the first people who took time with me because I think he wanted to understand me too, as a Black person and as a Black woman. He’s a Hmong male and [we would talk about] what that means and we would sit and we would eat together. We would talk for hours politically about what it meant to be him and what it meant to be me.

The above reflection describes what networks do for one another: individuals often exchange political discourse related to their positionality and, as demonstrated above, race and gender dynamics and how these dynamics may show up for them in the workplace. Angela Jones described a similar network, formed by women of color for women of color.

These jobs are way too complex to try to figure it out on your own. So I think about the kinds of networks where there’s been a plethora of them for men, for centuries. And so, it’s trying to take some of the same playbook and really apply it and customize it for what

women need. Specifically around women of color because then you got the race on top of the gender, which adds that extra layer of challenge when you're in these roles.

Angela further elaborated that she is involved in a women leadership educational organization that advocates for women. The organization is an

advocacy organization that's built on research. [It] studies how many superintendents nationwide are women, [including] what is the typical route that helps a superintendent land the job, [and] some of the trends in terms of the challenges faced, and then using that organization to basically build a network of intentional supports, to try to create that support system that many women, [including] those that are in the role and are successful but didn't necessarily have, and [we are] starting that pipeline earlier.

In recounting their journey toward becoming a superintendent, and reflecting on the support systems that have helped them to persevere and thrive, each participant highlighted the significance of having mentors, sponsors, and networks. These support systems are critical to support women of color to survive and thrive as leaders.

Chapter Summary

The results from this chapter reveal two critical findings related to resilient factors that help women of color superintendents to thrive. The two findings are that women of color superintendents need to embody the resilient leadership skills and values necessary to buffer themselves against adversity, and that they need to build the support systems necessary to thrive as a leader. Specifically, the ability to communicate effectively was a leadership skill mentioned by all participants. However, as the participants shared their evidence of effective communication, it was apparent that a successful superintendent needed to differentiate their communication effectively with internal stakeholders and with external stakeholders, including the community at large. For example, Irene learned to communicate better with her internal stakeholders. Harriet also learned to communicate with her internal stakeholders. Angela, on the other hand, shared stories of how she communicated with external stakeholders, or the community at large. Additionally, quick decision-making skills are paramount to the superintendent's success. Most importantly, all of the participants spoke to centering students in their decisions. Angela, in particular, spoke about centering students in her rationale for making the tough decision to close small schools that were limiting the opportunities for a robust learning experience for students. Finally, all participants spoke about mentors, sponsors, and networks as systems of support for them as superintendents. These supports are essential for their resilience, especially in difficult political situations. Olga spoke to the extensive support she received from her mentors and sponsors, especially during the tough period of working through the pandemic. Through these skills, values, and systems, a woman of color sitting in the superintendency or aspiring to serve in the superintendency may build up her resilience for a complex, nuanced, and critical position for leading our schools.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

Given the significant disproportion of women of color in the role of school superintendents and the dearth of research on this topic, this research aimed to answer the following three research questions: (1) What are the career paths women of color take on their journey to the superintendency? (2) How does a woman's specific racial ethnic background get reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency? (3) What skills, strategies, and support have contributed to the success of women of color in the superintendency? In this concluding chapter, I begin with a summary of the study and its findings as it relates to the research questions and within the existent literature. I will then make recommendations for future research. Additionally, I will also expand on the implications of this research for leadership, equity, and democracy and for educational policies and practices. Finally, I will end with a conclusion and summary of the study.

Summary of Findings

This dissertation research explored the career paths toward the superintendency, the impact of their racial and ethnic background in the challenges and opportunities for the superintendency, and the resilient factors of the women of color who have ascended to the superintendency. Using a qualitative comparative case study design guided by the theoretical frames of intersectionality and gatekeeping theory, the following are the summary of the research findings.

Research Question 1: What are the career paths women of color take on their journey to the superintendency?

Three main findings emerged from participant responses regarding the career paths they have experienced on their ascension to the superintendency. The first set of findings includes the analysis and impact of formal educational programs in higher educational spaces. The second set of findings includes the informal preparation and much more personal lessons learned while engaging with colleagues and community members. The third set of findings reveals that the most common professional pathway for women of color superintendents is through the instructional leadership pipeline.

Finding 1: Variable Routes of Formal Preparation for the Superintendency

All participants received an undergraduate degree, graduate degree, and administrative services credential through a formal higher educational institution. Participants cited these experiences as formally preparing them for the educational qualifications of the superintendency. Three of the six superintendents have their doctoral degrees while three have their master's degrees. Both search consultants have their doctoral degrees. All the participants also have their administrative services credential. Two of the three participants who have their doctoral degrees spoke at length about their doctoral degree preparation program, because these programs were primarily taught by former superintendents, and the opportunity to learn from these instructors was highly valuable. All three participants with doctoral degrees spoke about the impact of their experience in their programs, which influenced them to pursue educational leadership.

Similar to findings from Grogan and Andrews (2002), superintendent preparation programs in the form of doctoral programs are increasingly important for increasing the diversity

of superintendents, because of the lack of formal educational programs specifically built just for superintendents at higher education institutions. All six superintendents' positions did not require them to have a doctorate degree, although leadership profiles may say "doctorate preferable" (see Figure 10). With the varying degree of expectations from district to district, of the three superintendents who completed a doctorate, two expressed that they found value in the learning experiences from their doctoral program. The two superintendents who found value in their doctoral program specifically mentioned the value in having professors who have served as superintendents, and thus, were able to lead class discussions that were applicable and relevant. These findings are similar to findings from Tripses and colleagues (2013), where their findings resulted in participants wanting faculty who understood the demands and challenges of the role of the superintendency. Given the importance and value these formal preparation programs have in shaping and developing the leadership pipeline, students recruited for graduate programs, especially doctoral programs, should represent the diversity of public classrooms, thereby effectively supporting future superintendents to be inspired to serve school districts in the role of superintendent (Davis & Bowers, 2019). This is similar to how Christy was inspired by her doctoral program. Additionally, as Davis & Bowers's (2019) research shared, doctorate degree holders are twice as likely to become superintendents as those who do not hold a doctorate degree, implying the urgency to recruit and support women of color into doctoral programs. Additionally, superintendents with a stronger academic preparation were likely to remain in their positions (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Similar to Christy, Superintendent Irene Kim was inspired in her doctoral program by one of her professors. Irene was so influenced by this professor that not only was the professor on her dissertation committee but, years later, Irene would consult her regularly when Irene was considering applying for the superintendency. One final note from Davis & Bowers's (2019) research highlights that "preparation programs must also be cognizant of the fact that the peak likelihood of their graduates becoming superintendents immediately follows program completion (ostensibly when they obtain certification). This is a great responsibility for preparation programs that have implications for timing of course/program activities (e.g., resume development and interview exercises), curriculum, and professional networking (e.g., getting advanced candidates in front of prospective districts and school boards)" (p. 35).

While formal education was required to meet the qualifications for the superintendency role, research revealed that structured training brought additional benefits that might not be captured through formal curriculum.

Finding 2: Political Acumen and Relationships Are Central to Informal Preparation for the Superintendency

Participants in this study each described one or more moments outside of the formal educational spaces that prepared them for the complexities of the role of the superintendency. Developing their political acumen for the nuanced and highly political aspects of their role was seen as an area where the superintendents did not necessarily learn in a classroom, but through interactions with colleagues, family members, and community members. Similar to findings from Nash and Grogran (2021), this theme shows up in the literature often as superintendents drawing upon their individual experiences as potentially more important than their academic preparation. In addition, participants spoke about the ability to foster relationships with their educational partners. Harriet in particular spoke about her continuous calls, texts, and meetings with her board members to foster positive relationships with them. Irene spoke about the need to "feed

and care” for her board. In addition, Irene candidly reflected on her growth in her understanding of what it means to foster relationships; she admitted to, previously, being hyper focused on getting things done versus stopping to talk with people. However, in hearing her reflection of her past leadership behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on relationships, I can not help but link it to Rosette and colleague’s (2016) work, which helps us to understand the intersectional effects of agentic deficiencies and penalties prescribed to women of color. Awareness of these stereotypes helps women of color aspiring to serve as superintendents to recognize these stereotype threats and, more importantly, to dispel the stereotypes through education and conversation about their harm, when engaging in authentic and trusting relationships.

Finally, the informal preparation theme illuminates the gap in the current literature, as so much of the literature is focused on the formal preparation and professional development available for superintendents, versus the genuine and authentic learning through personal experiences. In the case of Harriet Jones, superintendent from Case Study 3, she credited her father as one of her earliest teachers in navigating the politics of race and gender, especially in highly politicized contexts. In addition, her experience as the first Black woman administrator in her town’s local high school helped Harriet to navigate the politics of leadership through an intersectional lens. As Harriet reflected on her mentors, colleagues, and family members, including her own experience in Indiana, she articulated real-life examples of how to navigate “the politics of simultaneous membership in multiple social groups” (Rosette et al., 2016, p. 433), and how “these social categories interconnect concurrently, resulting in oppression of racial minority women” (Rosette et al., 2016, p. 433).

Finding 3: The Most Common Professional Pathway for the Superintendency is Through Instructional Leadership

Participants in this study ascended to the superintendent through the classroom as teacher, resource/support teacher, site administrator, central office administrator, and superintendent. Five of the six held an instructional leadership role as a central office administrator whereas only one of the six held a business leadership role as a central office administrator. These findings are consistent with the literature, which has shown that most women who ascend to the superintendency enter the role through the instructional leadership pathway (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Nash & Grogan, 2021). In addition, all participants held the position of assistant superintendent before assuming the superintendent position, also consistent with the literature (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). However, participants who ascended to the superintendent position by way of the instructional pathway expressed their wish to have participated in more nontraditional experiences, such as school finance, facilities, and bonds. Both search consultant participants echoed this by advising aspiring superintendents to obtain as many broad bases of experience as possible, to avoid being pigeonholed into one or two areas of experience. This is also to mitigate the “double whammy” of disadvantage that they face due to their race/ethnicity and sex (Davis & Bowers, 2019)

Research Question 2: How does a woman’s specific racial ethnic background get reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency?

Three main findings emerged from participant responses regarding how a woman’s specific racial ethnic background is reflected in challenges and opportunities for the superintendency. The first set of findings includes the challenges and opportunities in the search

and selection process. The second set of findings includes the role of search consultants in constructing the leadership profile, conducting prescreenings, and positioning candidates in front of the board. The third set of findings reveals the impact of the composition and politics of the board on the search and selection process.

Finding 1: The Search and Selection Process Had Both Challenges and Opportunities

All participants spoke about their formal preparation, an institutional preparation program that resulted in a degree or certification, and informal preparation for the demands of the role. The informal preparation are those experiences and interactions that helped the superintendent to learn a valuable lesson in preparation for the role of the superintendency.

The greatest challenge shared from the research is that of being an insider candidate versus outsider candidate. Three of the six superintendent participants ascended to the superintendency after serving a few months within their organization as the interim superintendent. In all three cases, they were asked by their board to serve as the interim superintendent after the sudden departure of the previous superintendent, all of whom were male. One additional superintendent participant also served as an interim deputy superintendent for her organization before applying for the permanent position of superintendent. In total, four of the six participating superintendents came from within the organization.

A study by Matthews (2002) concluded that school board members may prefer outsiders because outsiders are more likely to listen to what the board wants. Gullo and Sperandio (2020) made note of *second-generation biases*, referring to the hidden barriers to women's success that aren't seen, but live in the water of the organization—such as organizational structures, biases, and practices historically designed to fit men's lives. These biases align with what Schein and Schein (2017) dubbed the third level of organizational culture: the basic underlying assumptions, often unconscious, that are taken for granted as truths. Additionally, Bolman and Deal (2017) proposed that an organization has “values that are intangible, regardless of what it articulates in its mission statement or formal documents” (p. 243). This proposal aligns with Maria's case study.

Maria, one of the four insiders, went into detail regarding her experience applying for the position. She was challenged by the process because of the stereotype threats against her due to her race and gender, and because the board held her insider status against her. *Stereotype threat* is the threat of being judged negatively in settings where there are negative stereotypes about one's social group (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Maria's experience substantiates the insider phenomenon: women of color insider candidates have it tougher than outside candidates in the search and selection process (Kamler, 2009). As shown through Maria's experience and perhaps as implied in Harriet's reluctance to apply for the permanent appointment, insider candidates may have it tougher because, as Matthew (2002) found, “many school board members, superintendents and search executives think they see school boards changing old habits because of their desire for better student test scores, as well as growing unhappiness with the work of many of the superintendents they hire” (p. 16). While this may be the case, stereotype threat may also be a reason female candidates of color must prove themselves worthy. Thus, the challenge of being an insider candidate for women of color exists because of the board's perception of the candidate's leadership coupled with the systemic stereotype threats against the candidate. This is perhaps the greatest challenge for women of color pursuing a superintendent position from within their current organization.

However, this study found that opportunities do exist for women of color pursuing the superintendent position. All of the participants ascended to the position from the classroom as teachers and five of the six served in central office instructional leadership positions. All of them had been tapped into one of their leadership positions on their path toward the superintendency and all of them spoke about their love for students, especially underserved and underrepresented students. Because of their instructional backgrounds and experiences, they have the opportunity to share their experiences and showcase their curriculum and instructional background. This is an attractive trait in a superintendent because board members have a desire to see student academic success in their community of service and to make schools a better place for students (Robinson et al., 2017). Thus, a strong understanding of pedagogy and instructional leadership is an opportunity for women of color candidates wishing to pursue the superintendency.

In addition to curriculum and instructional knowledge, all six participants in this research spoke of their desire to build a coalition in their community and collaborate effectively with their stakeholders. This is also an opportunity for women of color candidates to showcase their skill sets; the literature shows women's leadership styles are more collaborative and facilitative than those of male leaders (Robinson et al., 2017). Women tend to seek collaboration, positive working relationships with their educational partners, and feedback and input to support their vision and mission (Gipson et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2017). Both search consultant participants also confirmed that these are assets to be showcased during the search and selection process because boards are often looking for leaders who can get along with others and lead positively. Thus, a huge opportunity during the search and selection process is for women of color applicants to demonstrate their strengths in supporting people, building relationships, and caring for the people in their community. These important attributes of building teams, collaborating effectively, and knowing how to build coalitions are exciting opportunities for women of color aspiring superintendents to highlight their emotional intelligence and professional experiences.

Finding 2: The Role of Search Consultants in Constructing the Leadership Profile, Conducting Prescreenings, and Positioning Candidates

The challenges and opportunities of the search and selection process implicate the role of search consultants. As stated previously, search consultants have three primary responsibilities. They must construct the leadership profile, conduct preliminary screenings of applicants, and position candidates in front of the board. While it may seem all these steps are filled with challenges, there are also opportunities for candidates.

First, the characteristics that are highlighted in a search profile often ask for applicants to have instructional backgrounds and experiences (see Figure 10). In this research, all six of the superintendent research participants ascended from the classroom, meeting this highly desirable characteristic. Second, the search consultants must conduct preliminary prescreenings of the applicants, and both participating search consultants advised applicants to contact search consultants to express their interest so that an informal conversation can take place. Additionally, all internal applicants from this research shared they contacted the search consultants in advance of the submission of their application. This initiative to contact the search consultants in advance positions the woman of color applicant favorably, as it gives the applicant the opportunity to connect with the search consultant and ask questions about the process. Finally, this connection provides for the applicant to connect with the search consultant so that the search consultant can highlight the strengths of the applicant to the board, positioning them for a possible interview.

Despite the gates of the search process, this second set of findings does provide insight into the process, which may allow aspiring superintendent candidates to move forward proactively with their application in a search and selection process for a superintendent position.

Finding 3: The Impact of the Composition and Politics of the Board on the Search and Selection Process

In addition to the role of search consultants, the composition of boards may pose a challenge or opportunity for women of color candidates for a variety of reasons. Because of the tension and power dynamics at play between elected officials and senior-most public officers, the relationship between the superintendent and school boards has been studied and debated by multiple scholars (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). This relationship has become more difficult and complex because of community issues, such as politics, race, health access, food access, housing, and poverty. Superintendents often find themselves discerning how political power is divided within a community and how to work effectively with all groups (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Unfortunately, superintendents and boards contribute to the dysfunction when one or more struggle with being in charge versus mobilizing support for a coherent reform plan (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Ideally, school boards should focus on governance policies rather than meddling with administrative decisions. However, many board members overstep their policy-making roles by acting as political delegates, creating and shaping policy and intruding on administrative decisions (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

This study's third set of findings mirrors the complex role superintendents find themselves in with regard to managing their board. Board members' perceptions of the current conditions, including student achievement, how the previous superintendent's relationships were with stakeholders, and their own biases often impacted the challenges or opportunities for the superintendent in this study. Maria, for example, found her board members challenging during the search and selection process and believes it had to do with her being a woman of color and coming from within the organization. She believed that, because of stereotype threats, board members held a perception that she may not be able to navigate the complex problems associated with leading a district. Harriet also walked into a precarious situation with her board after her predecessor was asked to leave with 48 hours notice. Harriet expressed that she needed to come in gently and support the divisiveness of her board because not all of the board members had wanted the former superintendent to leave. Irene and Christy were also hired after a contentious termination of their predecessors, making their jobs more challenging as incoming superintendents. Both search consultants spoke at length about the impact of the board members on the search and selection process, but did confirm that the overall desire of boards for a diverse slate of candidates is in the favor of women of color candidates. While the "literature on school board and superintendent relationships highlights the tension between boards and superintendents and the political nature of school boards" (Fusarelli, 2006, p. 50), boards are also becoming more diverse. This diversity helps with the positioning of women of color candidates when they engage in the search and selection process, as attested by Harriet: "They want change and they want a person of color. I believe they want someone who mirrors the district."

Research Question 3: What skills, strategies, and support have contributed to the success of women of color in the superintendency?

Two main findings emerged from participant responses regarding the skills, strategies, and support necessary for success in the superintendency. The first set of findings implicates the resilient leadership skills and values necessary to buffer against adversity. The second set of findings includes the support systems necessary to thrive as a leader, including having mentors and sponsors, and a network for superintendents to call upon when necessary.

Finding 1: Effective Communication, Quick Decision-Making, Knowing When to Seek Assistance and Valuing Students are Necessary to Buffer Against Adversity

Participants in this research spoke to the leadership skills that build their resiliency and help to buffer against adversity. Two salient leadership skills are effective communication skills and the ability to make quick decisions when faced with adversity. All participants spoke about the need to communicate regularly and often with their board of trustees and community members. This often meant a system of communication was built in to ensure trustees were apprised of critical events. All of the participants used a regular communication protocol to keep their board members informed and all of the participants have a regularly scheduled meeting with board members. Over half of the superintendents also have a regular communication meeting with their labor leaders. In addition, all of the superintendents spoke of the need to make tough decisions. Reed and Patterson (2007) said about quick decision-making, “Superintendents need to draw upon their resilience reserves at times as they take tough public stands in the face of tough public opposition” (p. 97). This leadership skill requires courage and a strong set of convictions. Angela Jones, the superintendent participant from Case Study 4, spoke of this often and shared that people will follow leaders who lead authentically and who can make decisions in spite of the tough and often public conditions surrounding these decisions. Angela further shared that owning up to one’s mistakes is critical as a leader, even if it means losing some followers. However, Reed and Patterson (2007) noted, “But resilient superintendents possess a sense of efficacy to acknowledge their mistakes” (p. 97). These leadership skills allow a community to connect with their superintendent as an imperfect and humble human being.

In addition to embodying critical leadership skills, all participants either spoke directly to or implied that to remain resilient, they needed to know when to ask for help and seek the assistance necessary to move forward. The ability to lead in today’s environment requires vulnerability, forgiveness, and love, including both love for others and love of self (Peetz, 2024). Maria Sanchez, the superintendent from Case Study 1, spoke about needing and asking her board president for help to support the management of one board member in particular. Harriet followed up with a board member to coach her so that she understood the vote of the majority of the board. While Harriet didn’t specifically say that this was her asking her board member for assistance, she did imply in her recollection that she was following up with that particular board member to make sure she understood the majority of the board’s decision, implying that Harriet needed this board member’s assistance and understanding to support the collective will of the board and, thereby, the community.

Participants in this study also named the value of centering students in all decisions as a means of reminding them of why they entered the superintendency, which in turn builds up their resiliency. Olga shared that prioritizing students meant knowing when to say no, even to powerful groups, and being okay with possibly even losing her job over prioritizing students. Maria spoke about centering student achievement–related topics during board meetings, especially when her board loses sight of students and becomes too involved in political issues that don’t directly impact students. Harriet also spoke about student achievement and the value of

keeping student achievement at the forefront of board meetings. Angela shared that her purpose for entering the superintendency was to serve students. She reflected aloud about former colleagues who have been dismissed because of their inability to compromise. Angela reflected rhetorically by asking aloud, “Did you take the job just to be able to say, this is who I am? Or did you take the job to make sure the kids are getting a better education?” Indeed, centering students in decisions helps to build the resilience skills necessary to serve as a superintendent successfully.

Finding 2: Mentors, Sponsors and Networks are Necessary Support Systems

In addition to demonstrating the skills and values needed to serve successfully, female superintendents of color also need strong support systems. All participants spoke of mentors or sponsors that have helped them toward their ascension to the superintendency. All participants also agreed that had it not been for their mentors and sponsors, they would not have developed the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful as a superintendent. The surprising finding in this research is that all participants established their mentor and sponsor relationships before their superintendency. Leaders may not even realize the extent of investment and care those around them pour into their leadership development. An important lesson here for aspiring superintendents is to maintain relationships with former supervisors, critical colleagues, and family members, because mentoring and coaching may become very valuable in future roles like the superintendency. As an example, Olga talked about mentors and sponsors who helped her along her career pathway. She mentioned professionals who were her former supervisors or leaders in her district, who took an interest in supporting her professional growth. Olga’s sponsors continue to invest in her and meet with her regularly, to strategize, inquire, and challenge her thinking and actions, as well as invest in her through their own political influence. An interesting note is that two participants noted they had only male mentors or sponsors. My analysis with this is that while women and women of color are growing in the role of superintendency, there are still too few represented and, thus, there will be fewer in representatives serving as mentors and sponsors (Colvard & Zaharis, 2023). This interesting fact is alarming because while there are more women of color who have risen to the superintendency, there are still so few that when speaking about mentors and sponsors, existing women of color in the role will all eventually name at least one white male mentor or sponsor who have supported their career.

Networks are also important for women of color superintendents, as evidenced by this research. All participants spoke to a network they have joined. Angela from Case Study 4 in particular spoke to a network she has helped to establish and is currently leading as the chair of the board. In most cases, these networks focus on the intersectionality of women and race. Search Consultant Norma Flores advised the following about asking questions, “I would always say, don't ask what to do, but ask them to listen to your thinking and to see if they see anything that you're not seeing. In other words, it is necessary to become part of an active network and ask questions (Ward, 2023). This is especially important for aspiring superintendents who are also women of color.

Limitations and Future Research

This study challenges the dearth of research on women of color who have risen to the role of superintendency. This research also adds to the limited literature on the barriers and resilient

factors that have helped women of color ascend to the superintendency. However, there are limitations to this study, including generalization, given the data collection sites are all located in California. Thus, this study is limited to the generalization of the findings, and should not be applied toward the larger population of school superintendents nor toward all women of color serving as school superintendents. This study was limited to six women superintendents of color, and limited to only the social categories of Latina, Black and AAPI. As such, this study did not include all racial and ethnic categories, as well as did not capture the various types of school districts, including charter or private schools. With regards to future research, a number of recommendations have emerged. First, researchers should develop and use specific data collection tools that capture the voices and perspectives of women of color representatives when studying the role of educational leadership and superintendency. The data gathered would help to illuminate the challenges and opportunities pertaining to women of color in the superintendency. Similar to the research findings of this study, future research with a focus on women of color superintendents may add to the body of literature regarding the assets of these leaders, including their varied leadership experiences, relationships, and connection to the communities they serve. Second, future studies should continue to investigate the pipeline for these leadership roles, including an investigation of doctoral preparation programs and superintendent preparation programs that do not result in a degree. While a doctorate degree is often not a requirement for the superintendency, it is preferred and is often one of the first gates that aspiring women of color leaders must pass through in order to receive a fair review for the position. Finally, additional research should be conducted on those resilient characteristics and behaviors that support women of color to be successful, so that school boards and community leaders can help with the retention of women of color in the role of superintendency.

Implications for Leadership for Equity and Democracy and Policies and Practice

The superintendency continues to have a huge impact on the health of America's public schools. It is unsurprising then that the recruitment, hiring, and retention of superintendents remains one of the most important tasks of school boards. With the increasing diversity seen in our classrooms, and the increasing number of qualified and talented women of color holding leadership roles in the central office, there is no excuse for the lack of diversity in the superintendency, with regard to both race and gender. The following are recommendations to increase the diversity in the superintendency.

Job descriptions for the role of superintendent must include descriptive words that value collaboration, teamwork, and cooperation, whereby success is measured by goals and not by time spent. This honors and encourages women of color to pursue the superintendency without sacrificing their family or personal obligations (Diehl et al., 2022).

Superintendent preparation programs "should be up front with the realities of the position with their students about the conditions of the career pathways they will encounter on graduation" (Davis & Bowers, 2019). In Davis and Bowers's 2019 quantitative study of the career pathways of educators working toward their superintendent's certification in one state, they found educators were more likely to enter the superintendency immediately upon completion of the superintendency certification program. Thus, university programs bear the responsibility of designing and timing their course activities and content to match those immediate next steps of resumé development, interviewing and communication techniques, and professional networking (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

Additionally, because professional networking and mentorships are critical for women of color, superintendent preparation programs should consider designing a mentorship pipeline and matching program for their students to support this need (Enomoto et al., 2000; Davis & Bowers, 2019; Holmes & Parker, 2017). As of AASA's most recent decennial study, only about 9.8% of respondents had participated in some form of executive coaching (Tienken et al., 2020). Those programs serious about achieving different outcomes must be more intentional and purposeful in supporting rigorous, year-long, paid internships that will help students apply their theoretical learning, but also provide for students the direct ability to develop their relationships with mentors and networks (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Tripses et al., 2013; Holmes & Parker, 2017).

Regarding relevant content, Tripses, Hunt, and Watkins (2013) conducted a qualitative study of practicing superintendents in one state, Illinois, and obtained input regarding crucial content for success as future superintendents. The overwhelming consensus included the need for superintendents to understand school finance, law, communication, politics (including collective bargaining), instructional and ethical leadership, community relations, self-care, and advocacy (Tripses et al., 2013; Holmes & Parker, 2017). Women tend to teach in the classroom longer and are often on the curriculum and instruction side of the organization (Tienken et al., 2020; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Davis & Bowers, 2019). As such, it is even more critical that university preparation programs intent on supporting women superintendent candidates build an interdisciplinary approach, allowing for their graduate students to apply their theoretical knowledge across multiple disciplines and departments (Tripses, et al., 2013; Holmes & Parker, 2017; Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Finally, university professors and program leads must be more strategic and intentional in their guidance and advice of students when developing their dissertation topic (Holmes & Parker, 2017). This will help all students, and in particular women of color students, to engage in research and writing specific to the job of the superintendent, helping them to not only survive but also to thrive as future superintendents.

In addition, preparation programs must intentionally recruit sitting or retired superintendents, preferably of color, school board members, and headhunters or search committee members to serve as adjunct staff to help "tap" would-be women of color superintendents (Davis & Bowers, 2019). This tapping includes making a direct recommendation to gatekeepers, or search consultants and boards, to actively consider these promising future superintendents.

More programs like Chiefs for Change, Women in Leadership (Chiefs for Change, n.d.) also need to be intentionally designed to recruit, sponsor, and train women of color leaders to aspire and land in a position of school superintendent. Chiefs for Change is an 18-month executive leadership program where a small cohort of candidates learn and network around the transformational knowledge moves necessary to serve as future chiefs. In addition, this organization commits to placing its graduating executives in school districts, state appointments, and/or county offices as chiefs in education.

School boards serve as an important governing body for a community and school district. Given their influence and positional power, along with search consultants, they must intentionally commit to shaping the diversity of the superintendent applicant pool through the removal of any "gates" that may prevent such a pool from emerging (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Boards must undergo mandatory anti-racist, gender bias, and implicit bias training, and consultants and boards should invest in mentoring and advocacy for women of color in central office positions (Kamler, 2009). Additionally, normalizing non-male career paths toward the

superintendency, such as elementary school leadership and curriculum and instruction leadership, supports more women of color in successfully entering the superintendency (Tallerico, 2000).

Summary and Conclusion

This comparative case study was conducted via semi-structured interviews with six women of color superintendents and two search consultants. Two superintendents identify as Latina women, two identify as Black women, and two identify as AAPI women. Both search firm consultants identify as Latina women.

This study found that all participants traversed through many gates on a career pathway that consisted of classroom teacher, resource teacher, assistant principal, principal, central office administrator, and superintendent. Three sets of findings arose from this research. First, the pathway toward the superintendency consisted of formal preparation and informal preparation, and most of the superintendents in this research arrived to their current position by way of instructional leadership roles. Second, this research highlighted the search process, including the challenges and opportunities in the search process, demystified the role of the search consultants, and revealed the impact of the board composition and its politics on the search process. Finally, the third set of findings revealed the leadership skills and values and the support systems necessary in order for women of color superintendents to survive and thrive as leaders.

With the evolving and increasing demands associated with the superintendency, including the need for superintendents to look outward and to be knowledgeable of all facets of education within the district, there is a critical need to build and train superintendents to meet the demands of this highly politicized job (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Holmes & Parker, 2017). This urgency becomes even greater for women of color aspiring to serve as superintendents because of the inherent biases against them. Davis and Bowers's (2019) study revealed that "females and educators of color may have a stronger requirement to have held a district level position prior to the superintendency, while male and white educators often move from the principalship to the superintendency" (p. 33). As such, continued training and public policies that support the minimization of biases and second-generation biases are necessary in order for superintendents to be more representative of U.S. classrooms.

The opportunity now is ripe for change and diversity. With superintendent vacancies on the rise, local communities, school boards, search firms, higher education organizations, and national educational associations can choose to collaborate on building, recruiting, hiring, and sustaining more women of color to successfully serve in the highest administrative office in K–12 education.

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Appendix A: Research Participant Invitation Email

Greetings,

My name is Tu Moua Carroz (she/her), and I am a third year doctoral student at the Berkeley School of Education at UC Berkeley. I am conducting a study that seeks to understand how aspiring or sitting women of color superintendents are experiencing and navigating their journey to serve in or who are currently serving in the role of school superintendent. This study also seeks to understand the intersectionality of both gender and race, and how the two categories converge in one's career pathway towards the superintendency, or again, in the superintendency.

This study only involves an interview, scheduled at your convenience. The interview should last approximately 60 minutes, and will be conducted over Zoom.

Participation is voluntary, and I will make every effort to ensure your responses remain as confidential as possible.

Please note that your voluntary decision to participate in this research should be conducted outside of your employment hours. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at tu_carroz@berkeley.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Tu Moua Carroz (she/her),
Graduate Student in the Leaders for Equity and Democracy (LEAD) Ed.D Program
Berkeley School of Education
University of California, Berkeley

Appendix B: Individual Interview Protocol

I. Introduction:

Thank you so much for taking your valuable time to participate in my interview for my research study! My name is Tu Moua Carroz, and I am a doctoral student at UC Berkeley in the Berkeley School of Education. I will be conducting the interview today.

I am conducting the interview in order to better understand the journey that women of color experience on their path towards the superintendency. In particular, I am interested in understanding your experience, as a woman of color leader, serving in the role of the superintendency, and the professional development path you

I have received your signed consent form agreeing to be a part of this interview today.

The interview should last between 45 and 60 minutes. Before we begin, we need to agree on some ground rules and guidelines. You are free to stop this interview at any point in time, request that we skip a question, or withdraw from the study at any point without any penalty. Also, if you feel uncomfortable showing yourself in the meeting, you have the right to turn off the video by clicking “stop video.”

I understand that an interview may bring up triggering, sensitive or emotionally charged experiences given the topic. If you need support, I will provide information about local mental health service resources and email it to you after the meeting. Also, please be careful not to include any information in your responses that could identify other individuals. The identifiable data will be saved as password protected and encrypted file at all times, including during transferring. One month after the recordings are obtained, the recorded information will be transcribed. The recordings will be destroyed after the information has been transcribed. The identifiable data, including the link between identifiers and coded data will be retained for up to 3 years.

Do you have any questions before we begin? If it is okay with you, I'm going to start recording.

II. Interview Questions:

1. Informant's work history

- Please provide a brief overview of your work history.

2. Background and Experience

- Can you please describe your work as an educational leader/Superintendent for _____ school district?
- What experiences have led you to where you are if you didn't mention it already in your brief work history?

3. Informant's Perspective of Organization

- What barriers, if any, have you encountered on your leadership path as a _____ for your district?
- What are the different kinds of barriers you've encountered in your organization?
- Would you say that the barriers you experienced as a woman of color are the same for white women, based on your observations? Would you say the barriers you experienced as a woman of color are the same for men of color?
- What is your relationship like with board members?
- What is your relationship like with your colleagues?
 - a. Can you reflect on the importance of relationships in leadership generally? Are there examples you'd like to share?

4. Training and Career Path

- What has been your career path that has led you to where you are now?
- What training has prepared you for the superintendent role?
- What skills do you believe are necessary for one to thrive in the role of superintendent?

5. Thriving in the Role

- What has been helpful as you navigate your career?
- Who do you turn to, either at work, home, or community, for support? How have you leveraged your relationships to support you during this time?
- Could you please describe a scenario where you had not been supported and what would have been helpful?
- What professional development would be most helpful for you as a woman of color in your role?

6. Future Implications for further research

- What policies or practices would help eliminate these barriers for women of color?

7. Closure and Gratitude

- Generally, do you perceive your district as valuing your gender and racial identity? How do you know?
- What things would you like to change at your school and district, if anything, to create a better environment for you and others in your school?
- What is the racial or ethnic identity that you most identify with?
- What gender do you identify with?
- What is your age?
- What aspect of your racial/identity are you most challenged with?
- What are you most proud of as a professional?
- What are you most proud of as a woman or as a person?
- Is there anything else you want to share that we haven't talked about yet?

- Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Do you have any questions or concerns?

Appendix C: Notice of Approval For Human Research



Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS)
Office for Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS)

1608 Fourth Street, Suite 220
Berkeley, CA 94710-5940
510 642-7461
ophs@berkeley.edu
cphs.berkeley.edu
FWA# 00006252



NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

DATE: *November 07, 2023*

TO: Erin Murphy-Graham
Tu Carroz

CPHS PROTOCOL NUMBER: *2023-01-15979*

CPHS PROTOCOL TITLE: *Exploring the Risk and Resilience Factors for Women of Color as School Superintendents*

FUNDING SOURCE(S): *NONE*

A(n)*new application* was submitted for the above-referenced protocol. The Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) has reviewed and approved the application on an expedited basis, under Category 6, 7 of the federal regulations.

Effective Date: *November 07, 2023*

Expiration Date: *November 06, 2033*

Continuation/Renewal: Applications for continuation review should be submitted no later than 6 weeks prior to the expiration date of the current approval. Note: *It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to submit for renewed approval in a timely manner. If approval expires, all research activity (including data analysis) must cease until re-approval from CPHS has received.* See [Renew\(Continue\)an Approved Protocol](#).

Amendments/Modifications: Any change in the design, conduct, or key personnel of this research must be approved by the CPHS **prior** to implementation. For more information, see [Amend/Modify an Approved Protocol](#).

For protocols that have been granted approval for more than one year: Certain modifications that increase the level of risk or add FDA oversight may require a continuing review application to be submitted and approved in order for the protocol to continue. If one or more of these changes occur, a Continuing Review application must be submitted and approved in order for the protocol to continue.

Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events: If any study subject experiences an unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others, and/or a serious adverse event, the CPHS must be informed *promptly*. For more information on definitions and reporting requirements related to this topic see [Adverse Event and Unanticipated Problem Reporting](#).

This approval is issued under University of California, Berkeley Federalwide Assurance #00006252.

If you have any questions about this matter, please contact the OPHS staff at 642-7461 or email ophs@berkeley.edu.

Sincerely,

Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS)

UC Berkeley