

WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS IN MICHIGAN'S COPPER COUNTRY:
GROWING IN NUMBERS

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A Research Project

Submitted to Dr. Derek Anderson

In partial fulfillment of the Education Specialist degree

Northern Michigan University

Summer 2012

Abstract

The majority of teachers are women yet few women are found in the superintendency. The American Association of School Administrators reported approximately 24 percent of school superintendents within the United States are female (2010). In Michigan's rural Copper Country Intermediate School District, three (23%) of the thirteen local school districts recently chose women as their executive leaders.

Many women in education possess the experience, skills, and talents necessary to become excellent school superintendents, yet women have reported facing challenges as they pursue their goal of becoming a superintendent (Brunner, 2000b; Montz, 2004). Since quality leaders are needed to lead schools, it is important that society, as well as potential candidates, gain a better understanding of abilities, experiences, and perceptions of current female superintendents. There is limited research in this area.

The purpose of this study is to identify and examine personal and district demographics, career paths, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and barriers experienced while seeking superintendency for three women superintendents in the Copper Country Intermediate School District. This study gathered information through an online survey, and then obtained additional qualitative data through personal interviews.

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a majority of big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show cities and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man.

—Ella Flagg Young, 1909

First Female Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Though women hold numerous leadership positions in education, women as a group continue to be underrepresented in the ranks of American public school superintendents. About 24 percent of school superintendents within the United States are female (AASA, 2010). In Michigan's rural Copper Country Intermediate School District, which spans three counties, three of the thirteen local school districts recently chose women as their executive leaders.

The task of studying women superintendents is important as we seek to lift the barriers to equity. The staggering changes for women in family life, religion, government, employment, and education did not happen spontaneously. Women made these changes happen over the course of time, participating in activism for change in laws and human nature. Seven generations of women have come together to affect these changes in the most democratic ways: through meetings, petition drives, lobbying, public speaking, and nonviolent resistance. Research is another avenue women have taken in their valiant efforts to create a more equitable world – the majority of research about women in education leadership has been conducted by female scholars (Brunner, 1999). Theory generation and verification, collaborative change, and problem-centered real world practice can be byproducts of quality research. The goal of this study about women superintendents in Michigan's Copper Country is to inspire activism in myself and the women around me: The time for equity in education administration is today.

The purpose of this study is to identify and examine personal and district demographics, career paths, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and barriers experienced while seeking superintendency for three women superintendents in the Copper Country Intermediate School District. The study gathered information through an online survey, and then obtained additional qualitative data through personal interviews.

Statement of the Problem

Women make up the majority of the ranks of educators; however, they remain underrepresented in the superintendency. According to the most recent statistics, about 75 percent of all teachers are female (NCES, 2012) while only 24 percent of superintendents are female (AASA, 2010).

Many women in education possess the experience, skills, and talents necessary to become excellent school superintendents. Women have reported facing challenges as they pursue their goal of becoming a superintendent (Brunner, 2000b; Montz, 2004). Since quality leaders are needed to lead schools it is important that society, as well as potential candidates, gain a better understanding of abilities, experiences, and perceptions of current female superintendents. There is limited research in this area. This study will identify perceived characteristics, skills, and barriers of practicing female superintendents in Michigan's rural Copper Country region.

Research Questions

This study, which is a modified replication of Montz's 2004 study of women superintendents in a Midwestern state, is based upon three research questions. Similar research questions were also used to study women superintendents in Missouri (Miller, 2006) and Ohio (Edgehouse, 2008).

- 1) What are the district and board demographics, career paths, and personal demographics of the current female superintendents in the Copper Country?
- 2) What characteristics and skills do practicing female superintendents perceive as important in the selection of a female candidate as the district's superintendent?
- 3) What do female superintendents perceive as barriers for female candidates aspiring to the superintendency?

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, a number of key terms will be used.

A *barrier* is an obstacle that obstructs or impedes progress toward a goal.

Board members are individuals elected by the voters of a public school district to serve on the Board of Education.

A *career path* is the complete work history of the superintendent.

A *characteristic* is defined as “consistent behavior pattern representative of an individual’s distinctive trait, quality, or attribute” (Montz, 2004, p. 8).

Mentoring is the practice of an individual serving as a guide and advisor, to aid in professional growth and advancement.

A *perception* is an opinion or belief expressed by a respondent (Glenn, 2004).

Superintendents are the administrative head of a public school district with responsibility for supervision and management of all aspects of operations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Upon her appointment as the first female superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, over one hundred years ago, Ella Flagg Young was optimistic about the future of women in the superintendency. Since her appointment, increasing numbers of women have entered a variety of previously male-dominated professions, businesses, and trades. Society has opened the ranks of the clergy, military, and the newsroom. However, substantial barriers to the full equality of America's women still remain. Though women hold numerous leadership positions in education, women as a group continue to be underrepresented in the ranks of American public school superintendents.

The Census Bureau described the position of superintendent of schools as the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Sharp et al., 2004). A 2010 study by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the AASA Center for System Leadership reported almost 24 percent of superintendents are female, an improved representation from previous statistics, but still pitiful when considering females are a majority overall in education careers. Of the female superintendents in the study, 55 percent were in small or rural districts, 35 percent were in the suburbs, and 9 percent were in urban areas (<http://www.aasa.org>). What have been the career paths of female superintendents in the rural, local area? What barriers continue to exist for women seeking roles as school superintendents, if any?

Researchers have identified a variety of barriers women face in school leadership (e.g. Glass, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Grogan & Brunner, 2005a; Ortiz, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Stanek, 1995; Tallerico, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004), producing several generalizations and theories reasoning why women still fall behind in top district posts.

- 1) Women are not in career positions normally leading to advancement.
- 2) Females in education are not preparing for the superintendency.
- 3) School boards still have prejudices based upon sex.
- 4) Females enter administration at an older age.
- 5) Women are neither as experienced nor as interested in fiscal management as men.

However, little research goes beyond simply naming such barriers. More research is necessary to bring about change in a field so largely dominated by men. Grogan (2005) suggested researchers “bring renewed critical perspectives and energy” to the issue of why so few women lead public school systems (p. 27). This study evaluated the extent to which women superintendents’ career paths, personal demographics, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and characteristics relate to the barriers these women encountered throughout their careers.

Past research about school leadership has primarily focused on men, while women have been studied only within the past twenty years. Studies of women and education administration may enrich appreciations of the social, political, and historical dynamics shaping women’s representation in leadership positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). A better understanding of the barriers women superintendents face and the women who can identify these barriers through experience may shed light on why this deficit is so prevalent.

Although all leaders in education may find value in a study seeking to find school systems supporting women and attempts to resolve barriers women face, those hiring school superintendents may benefit most through the examination of differences existing with women leaders, their backgrounds, characteristics, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and the barriers limiting their careers. Current education administration literature contains warnings about the

impending shortage of candidates to fill expected superintendent vacancies (Sharp et al., 2004). Additionally, researchers have suggested educational reform is best created and sustained under female leadership (Bjork, 2000; Grogan, 2000). In coming years could women overcome the perceived barriers to the superintendency, fill the anticipated shortage, and lead school reform?

Shakeshaft (1987) was one of the first researchers to study women in educational administration. Women superintendents have been the focus of more studies since. However, few studies have carefully examined the backgrounds and perceptions of barriers of women superintendents in Michigan. Marr (1991) studied the job satisfaction of Michigan's female leaders, Stanek (1995) surveyed all superintendents in Michigan about the perceived barriers women face in the superintendency, and Malnar (1996) explored personal and professional balance among female superintendents in Michigan's schools. These studies took place over a decade ago, when there were fewer women superintendents in Michigan to survey. Moreover, Marr (1991) and Malner (1996) were qualitative studies focused on job satisfaction and personal and professional balance, with small sample sizes, while Stanek's study (1995) compared men and women's differing perceptions about the lack of women in superintendent positions.

Research focused on the top leadership position may instigate and propel change in education leadership, as several authors (e.g., Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004) proposed educational researchers focus future research endeavors to determine why so few women occupy the superintendency. Who knows this answer better than current female superintendents? The purpose of this study about women superintendents in Michigan's Copper Country is to identify and examine personal and district demographics, career paths, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and barriers experienced while seeking superintendency.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach was appropriate for this study of women superintendents. Mixed methodology allows research questions to be answered through different types of data collection (Creswell, 2009). An online survey gathered information about characteristics, skills, and barriers of three practicing female superintendents in Michigan's Copper Country. This traditional structured approach of quantitative research was combined with the open style of qualitative research in data collection and analysis to gain a more thorough understanding of the problem. The qualitative study, interviews with three women superintendents, offered the opportunity to gain depth of understanding about career pathways and perceived barriers.

Delimitations affecting this study were identified. Delimitations are self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study. Delimitations include selecting female superintendents only from the Copper Country Intermediate School District in Michigan, selecting only superintendents (omitting other education leaders), and surveying women superintendents only. This study also focused on women leaders in the field of education, rather than women leaders in other fields. Finally, qualitative interviews were conducted following the completion of the online survey.

This study first employed a survey to gather quantitative data about the women superintendents. The purpose of a survey is to describe attitudes, beliefs, trends, and behaviors of a population by studying a sample (Creswell, 2009; Patten, 2005). The assumption was made that the participants were honest in their self-reporting. It was further assumed that all participants were aware of barriers associated with their position as superintendent; if participants had not encountered barriers, the results will not reflect the expectations.

After a careful review of the literature, the best option was to use a portion of a survey instrument designed by Montz for a 2004 study of women superintendents in a Midwestern state. This same instrument was used to study women superintendents in Missouri (Miller, 2006) and Ohio (Edgehouse, 2008). Montz (2004) and Miller (2006) utilized mixed methods, whereas Edgehouse (2008) used quantitative methods only. A pilot study was unnecessary as a result of utilizing another researcher's survey instrument, which had been validated.

The survey asked respondents to use a 4-point Likert scale to identify characteristics and skills that influenced their employment as a superintendent. The scale included four choices: (1) Disagree; (2) Mildly Disagree; (3) Mildly Agree; and (4) Agree. Since no neutral choice was offered, respondents were forced to take a position on each item. The third part of the survey asked respondents about barriers. This scale also included four choices: (1) Never, (2) Hardly Ever, (3) Sometimes, and (4) Frequently.

The second part of the research design included qualitative methods, the personal interview. When using qualitative methods, the flaws of researcher as instrument must be considered. "Central to conducting qualitative research, the researcher is the key person in obtaining data from respondents" (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003, p. 1). The researcher facilitated and created a context where respondents could share information and data regarding their experiences and life by facilitating the flow of communication and identifying cues. A semi-structured interview outline, similar to the outline used in Montz, 2004, was used to assist the researcher as she gathered personal demographics, career paths, and any stories about barriers the women superintendents were willing to share.

The following procedures for data collection were used:

- 1) Female superintendents of local school districts in the Copper Country were identified through the 2011 Michigan Education Directory.
- 2) The women superintendents were contacted via email requesting the opportunity to conduct personal interviews.
- 3) A survey link was emailed to the superintendents one week prior to the personal interview.
- 4) Personal interviews were conducted in the offices of the women superintendents in July 2012.

Descriptive statistics and a narrative analysis were used to present the findings. Using both data, conclusions were drawn and recommendations made. My gender and position as a woman seeking the superintendency may have a biased effect on the data collection and analysis. I want my contribution to education research to be useful, positive, trustworthy, authentic, and credible. For this reason, I reflected upon my role and identified personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of this study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

As described in Chapter 3, mixed methods were used in this descriptive study. The findings are based upon a quantitative questionnaire (Appendix A) and a qualitative interview (Appendix B). I sent an email to the three female superintendents practicing during the 2011-2012 school year inviting them to participate in the study. A second email was sent with an online quantitative questionnaire attached. All three superintendents took the online survey, resulting in a return rate of 100 percent. The survey findings are reported in a tabular format.

Superintendents were first asked to identify the most important reasons they were hired by the Board for their current position. Question 1 on the survey was, “How strongly do you agree that you were selected by the Board of Education to be the superintendent of your district because the Board of Education believed the following characteristics applied to you?” Respondents used a 4-point Likert scale to rank twenty personal characteristics. A number of characteristics were identified by 100 percent of the female superintendents as important: career oriented, competent, flexible, goal/task oriented, intelligent, resilient, and problem solver. All three superintendents disagreed with the statement that they were chosen because they were motivated by power. The findings from Part 1 are summarized in Table 1 (p. 14).

The second part of the survey focused on knowledge, skills, and abilities the superintendents perceived to be of value to the Board when considering a superintendent candidate. The survey question asked, “How strongly do you agree that you were selected by the Board of Education to be superintendent of your district because the Board of Education perceived that you demonstrated and possessed the following knowledge, skills, and abilities?” Again, the respondents went through the list of knowledge, skills, and abilities, ranking them using a 4-point Likert scale. The highest ranking options were: creating a vision, human

relations, school board relations, curriculum/instruction, and assessment/testing practices, although overall the respondents felt that all twenty of the knowledge, skills, and abilities were important. Table 2 reports the superintendents' responses from Part 2 (p. 15).

Table 1

Did the Board believe the following characteristics applied to you when they selected you?

Characteristic	Percentages (and Frequencies) of Responses			
	Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Agree
a. Assertive	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)
b. Career oriented	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
c. Competent	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
d. Competitive	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)
e. Personal relationships	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
f. Confident	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
g. Cooperative	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
h. Decisive	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)
i. Firm, fair, and consistent	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
j. Family oriented	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
k. Flexible	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
l. Goal/task oriented	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
m. Intelligent	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
n. Motivated by power	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
o. Supportive/approachable	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
p. Politically aware	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
q. Proactive	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
r. Problem solver	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
s. Resilient	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
t. Risk taker	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)

Table 2

Did the Board perceive that you possessed the following knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities	Percentages (and Frequencies) of Responses			
	Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Agree
a. Create a vision	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
b. Strategic planning	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
c. Model core values	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
d. Data driven decision-making to improve achievement	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
e. Ability to bring change	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
f. Human relation skills	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
g. Knowledgeable in finance	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)
h. Positive public image	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
i. Ability to motivate others	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
j. Ability to control emotions	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
k. Group decision-making	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
l. Facilities, maintenance and operation	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)
m. Curriculum, instruction	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
n. Collective bargaining	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)
o. Legal/personnel issues	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)
p. Knowledgeable of innovative education practices	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
q. School board relations	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
r. Assessment/testing practices	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)
s. Promoting parent involvement	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)
t. State and federal programs	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)

The last part of the online survey asked superintendents to respond to the question, “To what extent have you experienced the following barriers during your career as a school leader?”

Two superintendents reported they sometimes experienced a barrier because women are perceived to lack skills in managing facilities, grounds, and building projects. All three respondents said they never experienced barriers relating to: key experiences prior to the superintendency, personal level of motivation, lack of professional network and/or mentoring, lack of family support, inability to relocate, or the “old boy” network promoting men over women. Overall, the respondents reported never or hardly ever experiencing barriers in their careers. Table 3 summarizes the findings from Part 3, Barriers.

Table 3

Have you experienced the following barriers during your career as a school leader?

Barrier	Percentages (and Frequencies) of Responses			
	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Frequently
a. Personal anxieties about effect of career on family	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
b. Women are perceived to have inadequate skills in budgeting and finance	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
c. Personal level of assertiveness	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
d. Women are not considered politically astute	33.3% (1)	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
e. Women fail to plan for appropriate education and key experiences prior to seeking the superintendency	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
f. Personal level of motivation	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)

Table 3, cont'd

Have you experienced the following barriers during your career as a school leader?

Barrier	Percentages (and Frequencies) of Responses			
	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Frequently
g. Discrimination based on personal appearance	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
h. Lack of professional network and/or mentoring	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
i. Lack of family support	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
j. Hiring and promotional practices of board members and search consultants	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
k. Women are perceived as allowing their emotions to influence decisions	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
l. Inability to relocate	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
m. There is an "old boy" network that promotes the selection of men over women	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
n. Women are perceived to lack skills in managing facilities, grounds, and building projects	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)
o. Women are perceived as not able to achieve organizational goals	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
p. Conflict or confusion regarding career goals	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)
q. Women are perceived as not able to manage staff	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
r. Men are perceived to be more knowledgeable about administration; women are perceived to be more knowledgeable about teaching	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
s. Personal level of self-confidence	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
t. Men are viewed by the community and staff as more qualified for a leadership position	0.0% (0)	100.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)

Approximately one week following the online survey, qualitative data were gathered through personal interviews. All three female superintendents within the Copper Country Intermediate School District were selected and willing to participate in both facets of the study. The women were all the first female superintendent to serve their local school district within the past four years. At the time of the interviews, Doreen and Jennifer had just completed their first year as superintendent, and Monica was the “veteran” of the group with three years of service as district superintendent.

Doreen was superintendent of a rural K-12 school district with 1,330 students, and feeling confident about the year ahead. The district’s enrollment was growing in large part due to a great reputation and school of choice. Approximately one third of the district’s population was comprised of students who lived outside the boundaries of the school district.

Like Doreen, Jennifer was also beginning her second year as superintendent. Jennifer’s rural K-12 school district was the smallest of the three, with an enrollment of 500 students. In addition to her duties as Superintendent, Jennifer also served as the K-2 Principal to a primary building away from the main campus. Declining enrollment has been an ongoing threat to this small school district serving a large population of Native Americans.

Starting her fourth year as Superintendent/Middle School Principal, Monica served a rural K-12 district with a student population of 840. The district has operated at a deficit for a number of years, but they are working to close the gap. In addition to fiscal stress, the district has faced turmoil due to ill reports from the local paper about the Board of Education.

All of the interviewees served in districts with seven member Boards of Education. The make-up of the Boards consisted of a male majority. One district had one female member on the Board; the other two districts had three females serving their Boards. Monica said that overall

her Board was fresh and new. At the time of her appointment to the position as Superintendent, there was one female Board member; now there were three.

Education administration was the major field of study in all superintendents' highest graduate degree. Doreen and Jennifer had Education Specialist degrees, and Jennifer is currently working towards her Doctorate. Monica's highest degree earned is a Master's in Education Administration.

Adult education, K-8 classrooms, elementary/middle school library, and elementary computers were among the variety of teaching assignments in the superintendents' careers. The women had individually served as classroom teachers between eight and twenty years. All three superintendents held a principalship as their first administrative position. Doreen began her administrative career as an elementary principal, Monica as a middle school principal, and Jennifer's initial administrative job was in a K-6 two-room schoolhouse as a combination lead teacher/principal.

Mentors were important in the careers of all of the superintendents interviewed. Doreen noted, "Until you asked me that question, I had no idea that all my mentors were men." Monica also had male mentors. Jennifer reported a variety of mentors throughout her career, both male and female, and she explained how some of her mentors were not administrators but community members.

The interviews contributed additional information about the women's perceptions of the skills important to aspiring superintendents. "You have to have all those qualities to be effective. You need to be a good delegator – so the ability to find the leaders around you is especially important," shared one superintendent. Another suggested, "Patience. Flexibility. Be ready for change."

Unique career paths led these women to the superintendency. Monica was the only woman who began her university studies planning to be an educator. When Doreen first attended college she considered nursing. Jennifer studied art and design, and contemplated a religious life of service.

Once degrees in education were obtained, classroom teaching was not the only role these women had in the beginnings of their careers. After a few years in the classroom, Doreen was able to serve as Assistant to the Principal part time while she worked on her Master's degree. In addition, her love and expertise for computers and technology became utilized as she supervised the development of computer labs at schools in Florida and Michigan. Jennifer's resume was filled with a variety of employers from a summer health camp to Upward Bound, the U.S. Olympic Training Center to the public library. In addition, Jennifer was able to spend a few years as a stay at home mom, caring for her twin daughters. Monica's career beginnings involved employment at a residential program for juvenile delinquents; she also taught GED coursework part-time in the local adult education program while her children were young.

The women eventually settled into more permanent teaching positions. Doreen became the computer teacher in the elementary school where three years later she would become principal. Jennifer became principal/teacher of a K-6 two-room rural school, where she would remain for five years. Monica was hired for to teach middle school math full time and stayed in that position for the next ten years.

Doreen was first to become a full-time administrator, an elementary principal, in 2001; she was hired within for the position. Monica was next, landing a middle school principal position in a neighboring district in 2003. Jennifer moved from her principal/teacher position to

become a full-time principal in a neighboring district in 2008. Locally, female administrators were growing in numbers.

Personal demographics of the participants were organized in a table for an easy comparison. The women were relatively the same age; they all became superintendent within the ages of 43-48. Doreen was married with no children. Jennifer and Monica were divorced and remarried, both with two children. Jennifer’s girls were still school-age when she was hired as superintendent. Monica’s only living child had grown and was out of the house before her superintendency.

Table 4
Personal Demographics of Participants

Variable	Doreen	Jennifer	Monica
Age	47	44	51
Age at first superintendency	46	43	48
# year(s) in present position	1	1	3
# years teaching prior to administration	8	7	20 (10 part time)
# years administration prior to superintendency	10	8	6
Marital status	Married	Divorced/ Remarried	Divorced/ Remarried
# children raising/raised	0	2	2
# children in household while superintendent	0	2	0

All the women superintendents were hired for their current position from inside the district. Doreen believed she was offered the superintendency because the Board felt confident in her abilities. They appreciated her work in the district as elementary principal and she had already gained their trust. Her district was the only to utilize a professional search team from the

Michigan Association of School Boards. Two other candidates were publicly interviewed for the position of Superintendent in 2011, but the Board opted for Doreen, their internal candidate.

Jennifer felt that she was “vetted” for the superintendency. She was not seeking the position, but was persuaded by the retiring superintendent and the Board to consider the upcoming opportunity. She was the only candidate interviewed for the position. In conjunction with Jennifer’s promotion, the district restructured their administrative team to save money. Jennifer had briefly served the district as elementary principal, which included a K-2 building off campus and grades 3-5 on the main campus. She would retain her K-2 duties and add in the responsibilities of superintendent. Grades 3-5 were added to the 6-12 principal duties; now the district had two administrators instead of three.

Monica also shared that she did not seek out the superintendent position in her district; she was recruited for the job. Her Board had similar ideas of restructuring the administration to save on costs, moving from four full-time administrators to three. Monica had been serving as middle school principal – the Board of Education appointed her with the additional duties of superintendent in 2009.

Overall the female superintendents did not feel they experienced barriers in their careers. One superintendent shared, “Sometimes I am self-conscious about my appearance; I want to be neutral.” “Gender is less of an issue. I do not sense the ‘old boys’ network.” Another interviewee commented, “No, I never felt barriers.” All women said they felt it was getting easier for women to become a superintendent.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In 1909 Ella Flagg Young, first female Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, had a very positive outlook for women achieving the superintendency. Young believed "women are destined to rule the schools of every city" (Blount, 1998). Over a century later, women have yet to dominate the top position in America's public school systems.

In Michigan's rural Copper Country, three women were recently selected from within their local school districts to lead as superintendent. The career paths and perceptions of these three women were studied using a mixed methods approach, in this modified replication of a previous study (Montz, 2004). Quantitative data were gathered through an online survey, modified from the original questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews with the three women obtained qualitative information on the perceptions of local women superintendents. The findings were presented in tabular and narrative form. Through the surveys and interviews, three women superintendents shared their perceptions career paths, and information about any barriers they had encountered. Analysis of the data will be discussed in terms of the three research questions.

The first research question asked, "What are the district and board demographics, career paths, and personal demographics of the current female superintendents in the Copper Country?" The personal demographics were compared to Brunner and Grogan (2007), a national study of the superintendency, and Montz (2004), which served as a model when designing this study. The women superintendents in the Copper Country were all younger than 55; in both Brunner and Grogan and Montz most women were younger than 55. Two thirds of the women superintendents in the Copper Country had raised children; Brunner and Grogan found 77

percent of women superintendents had raised children at some point in their careers. Montz did not report about children in her findings.

Multiple studies (Blount, 1989; Edgehouse, 2008; Glass, 2000; Montz, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1989) have shown women superintendents are more likely to work in small districts. The Copper Country is completely composed of small districts, all under 1,600 students, so all three women in this study were leading small districts. Women in Ohio (Edgehouse, 2008), Iowa (Montz, 2004), and across the nation (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), are being hired by the districts in which they already work. Similarly, all three women in this study were internal hires. The districts of the three superintendents had primarily men serving on their Boards of education; this factor is similar to national statistics (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Women superintendents in the Copper Country are well educated. Two thirds of the female superintendents in this study hold a degree beyond a Master's degree (Ed.S.). One of the three will soon hold a doctorate. The national study by Brunner and Grogan, 2007, revealed 57.7 percent of women superintendents hold a terminal degree. The highest degree of about one-half of the participants in the Montz study (2004) was a specialist, and one third had earned a doctorate.

Mentors were important to all three women in this study. In studies by Montz (2004) and Miller (2006) the majority of superintendents had a mentor help them become a superintendent. Other research has confirmed mentoring is important to women who seek the superintendency (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). If current female school administrators mentor strategically, and succession planning becomes an integral role as superintendents prepare to mentor those who succeed them, women may have more access to the superintendency (Tallerico & Tingley, 2001). Many women in education possess the experience, skills, and talents

necessary to become excellent school superintendents, and researchers have suggested educational reform is best created and sustained under female leadership (Bjork, 2000; Grogan, 2000). Succession planning and strategic mentoring could have a direct impact on equity in education administration. However, if local women superintendents have not perceived gender barriers, they will be less likely to participate in strategic mentoring of women aspiring to the superintendency.

My second research question stated, “What characteristics and skills do practicing female superintendents perceive as important in the selection of a female candidate as the district’s superintendent?” Women may face many challenges or barriers to attaining leadership positions in education; however, they often possess esteemed qualities, characteristics, and skills as described in leadership theory and research (Blount, 1998; Grogan, 1999; Montz, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 1999). Participants agreed they were hired because they possessed nearly every characteristic, with the exception of *motivated by power*. These findings run parallel to the study by Montz (2004). Twenty characteristics were listed in the instrument, and nineteen were found to be a characteristic that the participants believed factored into their hiring.

The final research question, “What do female superintendents perceive as barriers for female candidates aspiring to the superintendency?” brought a surprising response from the interviewees in this study. The Copper Country women superintendents did not believe they had faced many barriers. I was pleased to hear this yet surprised; research has reported otherwise (e.g. Edgehouse, 2007; Glass, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Grogan & Brunner, 2005a; Miller, 2006; Montz, 2004; Ortiz, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Stanek, 1995; Tallerico, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

According to Brunner (2000a), women have faced numerous types of barriers, including "societal beliefs in their inferiority; the need to choose between relationships and careers; weak or nonexistent support systems; expectations of their provision of maternal comfort and sacrifice; and overt and covert hostility" (p. xiv). Brunner's statement supports the findings of Edgehouse (2007) and Montz (2004). Their studies reported a number of barriers perceived by women superintendents; *personal anxieties about effect of career on family* had the highest mean in their research. In my study, the three women were split about the *personal anxieties* barrier. The three women responded "Never", "Hardly Ever", and "Sometimes." I believe this split could be a result of the factor of having children, and whether or not their children were still living at home during the superintendency.

Both Edgehouse (2007) and Montz (2004) also reported the barrier of *there is an "old boy" network that promotes the selection of men over women* was strong. School boards of education, in the Copper Country and in the nation, remain largely male. According to Edgehouse (2007), the "good old boys" were a perceived barrier of aspiring women superintendents in Ohio. The women in this study did not believe the good old boys network was a factor or barrier throughout their employment history. As a local female aspiring to the superintendency, I have a different perception of local networks.

The majority of teachers are women yet few women are found in the superintendency. I was privileged to hear the personal stories of local women superintendents, who exist as an underrepresented group in this career. A greater body of research needs to be conducted with women superintendents to learn how they access, maintain, and thrive in their positions. Skrla et al. (2000) called for the "conversation among and about women superintendents to increase in numbers, to widen in scope, and to escalate in volume so that neither the women themselves nor

the education profession in general continue to remain silent” (p. 71). Through my research and writing, I hope women considering the position will see how three women superintendents believed they experienced no barriers to the superintendency and are successful in their role. We need more aspiring women to pursue the position even more seriously.

Women in education administration are making progress, but the movement towards equal representation in the role of superintendent is slow. “If 75 percent of teachers in the U.S. are women and teaching is the first position on the pathway leading to the superintendency, we would expect to see many more women in the role” (Katz, 2006). Women superintendents in the Copper Country are growing in numbers, but we have not established equity until women are leading as much as they are teaching.

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APPENDIX A: QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

Characteristics:

Shown below is a list of characteristics that are common in effective superintendents.

1. How strongly do you agree that you were selected by the board of education to be the superintendent of your district because the board of education believed the following characteristics applied to you? (Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Mildly Agree, Agree)

- a. Assertive
- b. Career oriented
- c. Competent
- d. Competitive
- e. Personal relationships
- f. Confident
- g. Cooperative
- h. Decisive
- i. Firm, fair, and consistent
- j. Family oriented
- k. Flexible
- l. Goal/task oriented
- m. Intelligent
- n. Motivated by power
- o. Nurturing/supportive/approachable
- p. Politically aware

- q. Proactive
- r. Problem solver
- s. Resilient
- t. Risk taker

2. Please provide comments regarding characteristics of superintendents.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities:

Shown below is a list of knowledge, skills, and abilities that effective superintendents demonstrate and possess.

3. How strongly do you agree that you were selected by the board of education to be superintendent of your district because the board of education perceived that you demonstrated and possessed the following knowledge, skills, and abilities? (Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Mildly Agree, Agree)

- a. Create a vision
- b. Strategic planning
- c. Model core values
- d. Data driven decision-making to improve student achievement
- e. Ability to bring change
- f. Human relation skills
- g. Knowledgeable in finance
- h. Positive public image

- i. Ability to motivate others
- j. Ability to control emotions
- k. Group decision-making
- l. Facilities, maintenance, and operation
- m. Curriculum, instruction
- n. Collective bargaining
- o. Legal/personnel issues
- p. Knowledgeable of innovative education practices
- q. School board relations
- r. Assessment/testing practices
- s. Promoting parent involvement
- t. State and federal programs

4. Please provide comments regarding knowledge, skills, and abilities of superintendents.

Barriers:

Shown below is a list of barriers that may limit career opportunities for women in educational administration.

5. To what extent have you experienced the following barriers during your career as a school leader? (Never, Hardly ever, Sometimes, Frequently)

- a. Personal anxieties about effect of career on family
- b. Women are perceived to have inadequate skills in budgeting and finance

- c. Personal level of assertiveness
- d. Women are not considered politically astute
- e. Women fail to plan for appropriate education and key experiences prior to seeking the superintendency
- f. Personal level of motivation
- g. Discrimination based on personal appearance
- h. Lack of professional network and/or mentoring
- i. Lack of family support
- j. Hiring and promotional practices of board members and search consultants
- k. Women are perceived as allowing their emotions to influence decisions
- l. Inability to relocate
- m. There is an "old boy" network that promotes the selection of men over women
- n. Women are perceived to lack skills in managing facilities, grounds, and building projects
- o. Women are perceived as not able to achieve organizational goals
- p. Conflict or confusion regarding career goals
- q. Women are perceived as not able to manage staff
- r. Men are perceived to be more knowledgeable about administration; women are perceived to be more knowledgeable about teaching
- s. Personal level of self-confidence
- t. Men are viewed by the community and staff as more qualified for a leadership position

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

- I. Introduction
 - A. Personal introductions.
 - B. Thank you for your willingness to participate.
 - C. Confirm permission to tape record.
 - D. Explain purpose of the study.
 - a. Increase knowledge about the district and board demographics, career pathways, and personal demographics of female superintendents in the Copper Country.
 - b. Determine what characteristics and skills are perceived to be important in the selection of a female candidate as the district's superintendent.
 - c. Determine what current female superintendents perceive as barriers.
 - E. The research will be used for the completion of the researcher's Ed.S degree.
 - F. The interview is not part of a larger study.
- II. Open-Ended Questions
 - A. Tell me about your career path: your educational background and experiences that led you to the superintendency.
 - B. Tell me about your current school district and Board of Education.
 - a. How many Board members do you have total?
 - b. How many Board members are women?
 - c. How many Board members were women when you were selected?
 - C. Tell me why you think you were selected to be superintendent of your district.

- D. Tell me about your perceptions about barriers for women in aspiring to the superintendency.
 - E. Tell me about the leadership characteristics and skills you think will be important for women preparing for the superintendency.
 - F. Do you consider yourself a feminist?
- III. Personal Demographics
- A. Age
 - B. Marital status
 - C. How many children have you raised?
 - D. Age of children when you first became superintendent?
- IV. Closing
- A. Thanks, again.
 - B. May I contact you if I find it necessary to clarify notes or follow a new direction?