

VOICES OF FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF RETIRED FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

BY

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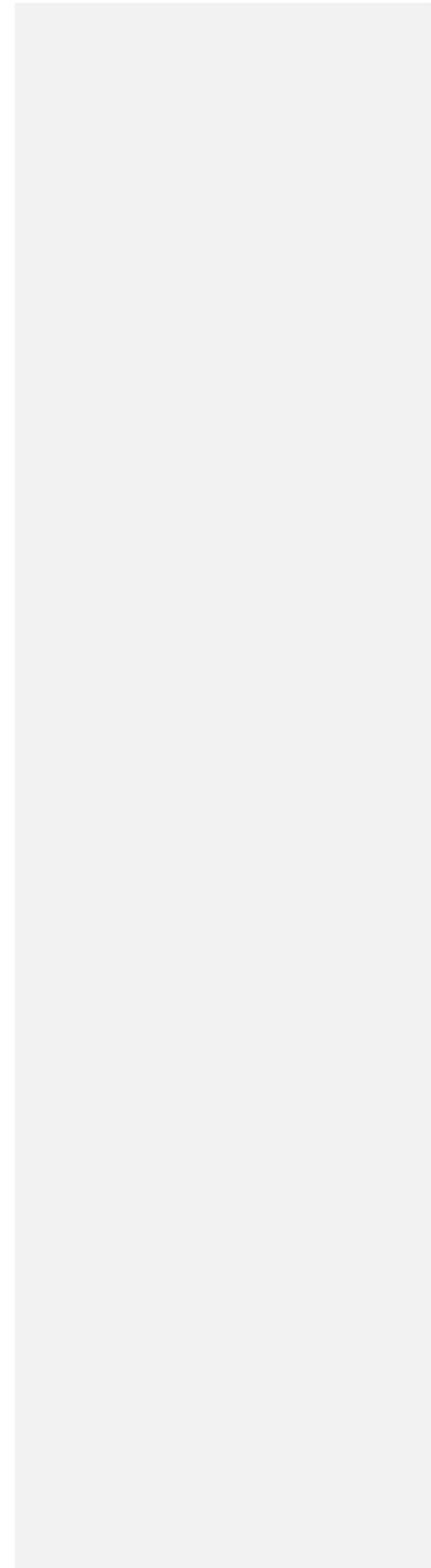
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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my mother Angela, my husband Peter, and my four children, Dalton, Cameron, Hailey, and Rainah.

I have grown to be grateful to my deceased mother, *Hurricane Annie*, for teaching me at a young age how to use my voice, and for instilling in me a strong sense of determination and persistence. Without these traits and the ongoing beloved whisper of her very demanding voice in my head, I would not have had the courage to push myself to finish a doctoral research project amidst my very busy life and taxing career as a school superintendent.

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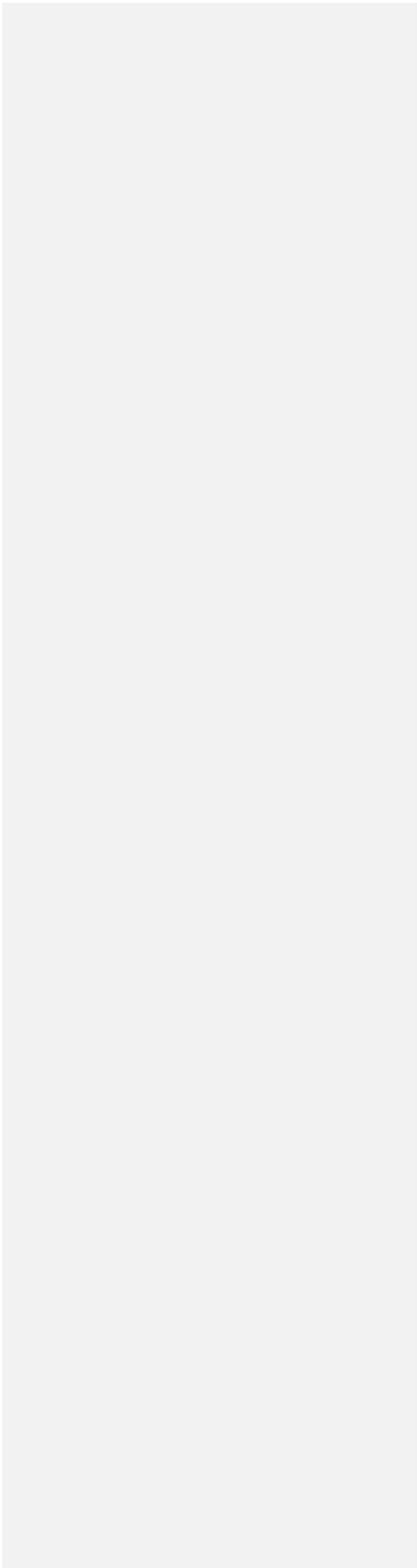
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Abstract

History has created many societal structures, expectations, and barriers that keep women in a particular place where their voices are expected to remain silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998). According to Gilligan (1982), women have difficulty listening to their inner voices and often choose to be silent because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions. The problem is we do not know how female superintendents are able to exert and develop their own voices as executive leaders when they are faced with societal expectations and other barriers expecting them to be silent or submissive. The question is: How do female superintendents explain to themselves and to others how their experiences impact the development of their own voices? The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents and discover how retired female superintendents describe how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. Critical moments are defined as times when female superintendents made conscious decisions about how best to use their voices in order to be heard. Participants were asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves, lived experiences, and pre-existing photographs of themselves to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. This research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men. Critical and Feminist Theory framed this narrative qualitative study. The research methods included a pilot study, interviews, journaling, surveys, and data collection with seven participants. The exploration of the retired female superintendent's perspective of her critical moments and voice has the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of what types of

supports, training, and resources women need in order to be successful in the superintendent role. The results of this study indicate retired female superintendents use their voices to advocate for themselves and others, they are courageous activists and reflective practitioners. This research study contradicts the belief that female leaders who demonstrate caring and collaborative personality traits are viewed as weak and ineffective (Young & Skria, 2003).

Key Words: Voice, Critical Moments, Critical Theory, Feminist Theory.

Voices of Female Superintendents

Women dominate the field of education making up the “78% of central office administration, 52% of principals, and 76% of teachers” in the approximate 14,000 districts across this nation (Superville, 2016, “Few Women”), yet there are only 23% of women serving as school superintendents (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012). “The U. S. Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as ‘... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States’ ” (Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supleyqa, 2004, p. 22). While the nationwide percentage of women serving in school superintendent roles has risen slightly from 13% in 2000 to 23% in 2012 (Superville, 2016, “Few Women”; U.S. Dept. Ed., 2016), women remain a minority group in this profession and there is a lack of data focusing on the stories of women in this role.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents. Participants were asked to share their stories as they relate to critical moments in their careers and reflect upon how they used their voices and created meaning of their experiences. For the purposes of this research the term *critical moments* was defined as times when female superintendents perceived either limitations or opportunities with their own ability to use their voices. Critical moments were explained as turning points in a superintendent’s career and times when one had to make a conscious decision on how best to use her voice in order to be heard by others. The term *voice* was defined as a metaphor for the variety of ways in which women are silent, speak, listen, act, and develop their own concept of self (Gilligan, 1982).

Knowing that many societal structures, expectations, and barriers exist that keep women in a particular place where their voices are expected to remain silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998), this study focused on listening to the authentic stories of seven retired female superintendents to learn more about how this group perceives how their experiences in this role impacted the development and use of their individual voice. Research informs us “women have more difficulty than men asserting their authority or considering themselves as authorities”; “women have difficulty in expressing themselves in public so that others will listen”; and “women have difficulty gaining the respect of others for their minds and their ideas” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 5). Knowing the role of a school superintendent requires one to be a public figure who communicates frequently and noting the research mentioned above which claims women have difficulty with communication, this study focused on learning more about how women used their voices as female superintendents. To assist with gathering the retired female superintendent’s perspective on the development of her voice, pre-existing work-related photographs were used (when available) as prompts to explore each participant’s recollection of her experiences and voice at the time of the photograph. Participants were asked to share what they were thinking at the time of the photograph and how those thoughts impacted their use of voice. While we know female superintendents have stronger feelings than their male counterparts about the gender biases that exist in the world of being a superintendent (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001), we do not know enough about the female superintendent’s self-reflection process and what she tells herself and others about how her experiences impact the development of her voice as an educational leader. Exploring the perceptions and thought processes of female superintendent leaders is important because school leaders have tremendous potential to positively impact social change within their

school environments. Niesche (2017) points out most leaders are not prepared for addressing the inequality and status quo within their school organizations because they are more concerned with processes than discovering their individual purpose. Effective leaders engage in self-reflection, take the time to discover their individual purpose, and reflect upon their own biases, so they can create environments where everyone has an equal voice (Niesche, 2017). Noting “working women are painfully aware men succeed better than they in getting and holding the attention of others for ideas and opinions” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 5), and “women worry that if they were to develop their own powers it would be at the expense of others” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 46), this research study has the potential to lead us to a deeper understanding of the types of supports, training, and resources women in this educational leadership role need in order to be successful.

Learning more about the voices of female superintendents requires an exploration of the past treatment of women aspiring to become superintendents. In Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency 1873-1995, Blount (1998) explains how male leaders ostracized women and groups of men worked together to limit a female’s access to this coveted superintendent role: “As the number of woman superintendents increased slightly, the predominately male Department of Superintendence lobbied diligently to eliminate the elected superintendency, opting instead for the appointment of professionals trained only at men’s postsecondary institutions” (Blount, 1998, p. 8).

Further research reinforces the theme of male dominance over women in the field of education, as it was not unusual for men to label female teachers or headmasters that were single or widowed as spinsters or lesbians (Gallichan, 1916; Faderman, 1978; Chauncey, 1983; Blount, 1998). Exploring the historical and societal context must be considered to fully explore how

female superintendents are able to use their voices today. Blount explains (1998) “if they (women) performed their supervisory and leadership role well, they were perceived as masculine because men traditionally controlled social structures and issued orders in this gender-stratified employment schema” and “masculine women were considered abnormal and undesirable with working with children” (p. 9). Blount (1998) further explains, “if women administrators performed their leadership roles with feminine demeanor, they were regarded as weak and ineffectual” (p. 9).

History informs us males dominated the educational leadership roles in the twentieth century and worked collaboratively to promote the belief that women were not capable of being effective managers and they were only suitable for teacher level positions (Blount, 1998). In the 1900's, it was rare to have a female superintendent because men coveted the position, but women made up more than 70% of the teacher force (Blount, 1998). Males controlled the leadership roles and female teachers and superintendents remained submissive to men in positions of power and teachers were not given equal opportunities to speak at national or state conferences (Blount, 1998). Between the 1900's and World War II, the number of women reaching the superintendent role reached a high of 9% because there was a demand to fill jobs when the men were at war (Blount, 1998, p. 2). Between World War II and the 1970's, societal expectations on women changed dramatically, making it more acceptable for women to assert their independence by going to college or setting out various career paths for themselves. As women's career choices expanded, one would have expected the number of women superintendents to increase during this time, but ironically, it declined to 3% by the 1970's (Blount, 1998, p. 2).

History and current data informs us the superintendent role remains a position reserved for

men; 77% men and 23% women are serving as school superintendents (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012).

As of 2017, the following data shows women remain a minority in the superintendent position:

- Schenectady, New York has never had a female superintendent in its 162-year history;
- Utah has no more than five women in the superintendent role;
- Richmond County in Georgia recently hired its first female superintendent;
- In New Hampshire there are 99 superintendents and only 36 are women;
- In Massachusetts there are 404 school districts and less than 60 of these districts have female superintendents; and
- In Rhode Island there are 34 school districts and 13 have female superintendents (Superville, 2016, "Few Women"; NH Dept. of Ed., 2017; MA Dept. of Ed., 2017; Rhode Island School Superintendents Association, 2017).

It is important to note how the ratio of men and women in both teacher and superintendent roles has changed over the years. In 2011-2012, the National Center for Educational Statistics calculated public school teachers were represented by 76% females and 24% men, showing a slight increase of 6% in the number of female teachers since the 1900's. Likewise, the 2012 U.S. Department of Education report calculated there were 23% females and 77% males in superintendent roles nationwide, showing a 20% increase in the number of female superintendents since the 1970's. While the number of female superintendents has risen, there remains a disproportionate gender ratio between the two roles of teacher and superintendent. Brunner (2012) claims, "the struggle for legitimacy and equity has consumed an entire century and, while taking women many places, it has not increased their representation in the superintendency" (p. xii). With less than a quarter of females in the superintendent role

nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012) this study aims to understand the lived experience and perspectives of women in this group.

The boundaries of this study are limited to the narrative stories of seven retired female superintendents and the exploration of their perspectives on the development of their own voices during critical moments in their careers. Participants were asked to recall critical moments in their careers, share their stories, and reflect upon how they used their voices and how they think others saw them during those times. Seven participants engaged in a process of self-reflection on their past-selves and lived experiences in order to share their current day perspectives on their thoughts and experiences.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is complex and centers on the societal norms and expectations that have been developed over time: women are treated less than men in our society (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998; Duerst-Lahti, 2010; Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014; Francis, 2014; Superville, 2016); women tend to be silent and passive because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997); and for centuries the superintendent seat has been dominated by men (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2001; Brunner, 2012; Superville, 2016). Research informs us that women face different types of challenges in the workplace; they are often put into lesser positions simply because of their gender and they have different types of barriers and gatekeepers to pass through before reaching the superintendency (Rosenthal, 2002; Kelly, 1995; Duerst-Lahti, 2010). Brunner (2012) conducted a narrative study with 12 female superintendents and claims, “women administrators have two battles – the first as a warrior for children, but the second as a warrior for themselves” (p. x). As the superintendent

position has traditionally been held by men, it is more important than ever to gather and understand the stories of women as they reflect upon their experiences as superintendents, particularly during critical moments in their careers.

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Pay Equity & Discrimination report (IWPR):

In 2015, female full-time workers made only 80 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gender wage gap of 20 percent. Women, on average, earn less than men in virtually every single occupation for which there is sufficient earnings data for both men and women to calculate an earnings ratio. IWPR's report on sex and race discrimination in the workplace shows that outright discrimination in pay, hiring, or promotions continues to be a significant feature of working life. If change continues at the same slow pace as it has done for the past fifty years, it will take 44 years – or until 2059 – for women to finally reach pay parity. For women of color the rate is even slower: Hispanic women will have to wait until 2248 and Black women will have to wait until 2124 for equal pay. (<https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/>)

There is contradictory data on the pay scale for female superintendents in comparison to their male counterparts. Long (2010) conducted a comparison mixed methods study with 161 male and female superintendents on their salaries, interview, and negotiation experiences. Long (2010) asked the following three questions: “1) Do male and female superintendents with equal educational background and educational experience earn similar salaries? 2) During the interview process, do male and females report similar experiences? 3) When competing for the superintendency, do men and women report different experiences in contract negotiations?” (p.

6). Long (2010) referenced the 2006 Educational Research Service study that revealed [female superintendents](#) made approximately \$9,000 more a year than their male counterparts (Long, 2010, p. 33; Hollingworth, 2006). Contradicting Long's research, Meir and Wilkins (2002) conducted a study of over 4000 superintendents and discovered females are paid approximately 5.5% less than men and receive 2% less than men for obtaining their doctorate (Kawaguchi, 2014, p. 14).

Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) conducted a multi-year study surveying over 25,000 Harvard Business School graduates and found that organizations are tracking women into lesser positions because the assumption that women will leave to become the primary caretaker of a family still exists in many organizations. They discovered women are not leaving the work place because they are taking care of families, rather they are leaving because they have been placed in positions where their skills are minimized and they do not see a chance for growth within the organization [\(p. 6\)](#). This study exemplifies that women often take the path of least resistance and choose to leave organizations when they see it as a no-win situation for them. Ely, Stone, and Ammerman' research (2014) further supports the problem of women being silent in our society because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997).

The problem is the superintendent seat has been dominated by men for centuries (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2001; Brunner, 2012; Superville, 2016). Glass (2001) [analyzed the American Association of School Administrator's study, 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency, which included data from 297 female superintendents out of a total of 2,262 superintendents](#), Glass (2001) offers the following reasons why males dominate this field [in his article titled, "Where are All the Female Superintendents:"](#)

- 1) Women lack the credentials to do the job. Even though women make up more than 50% of those in degree programs, only 10% of women are opting to earn the superintendent licensure.
- 2) Women are not in positions to move up to the superintendent seat. The common entry point to the superintendent seat is through secondary schools or central office and a majority of females work in elementary school.
- 3) Women are not as well versed in fiscal management as men. One third of female participants' reported their boards hired them to be instructional leaders.
- 4) Women are not seeking the position because of their family responsibilities.
- 5) School boards/committees are not willing to hire women superintendents. "Nearly 82 percent of women superintendents in the AASA study indicated school board members do not see them as strong managers and 76 percent felt school boards did not view them as capable of handling district finances. Sixty-one percent felt that a glass ceiling existed in school management, which lessened their chances of being selected" (Glass, 2001).
- 6) The focus for women entering education is teaching not administration.
- 7) Women spend more time in the classroom and make their decision to move up to the superintendent seat later than men, making it difficult for them to make the number of administrative moves necessary to become a superintendent (Glass, 2001).

As noted, the historical view and current research provides us with a variety of types of barriers and challenges female superintendents experience. The purpose of this research study was to explore the in-depth stories of seven retired female superintendents to discover how they

describe and make meaning of their own experiences during critical moments in their superintendency and discover their individual perceptions of the trajectory of their voice as they performed the responsibilities associated with a position traditionally held by men.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents and discover their individual perceptions of the development of their own voices as they faced critical moments as women performing the responsibilities associated with a position traditionally held by men and to discover how these women describe and make meaning of their own experiences during critical moments in their superintendency. For the purposes of this research, the term *critical moments* was defined as turning points and when female superintendents felt challenged in some way and needed to make a conscious decision about how to use their voice in order to be heard. The term *voice* was defined as a metaphor for the variety of ways in which women are silent, speak, listen, act, and develop their own concept of self (Gilligan, 1982). The definition of critical moments and voice were purposely broad and designed not to influence the direction of each participant's narrative story. The purpose of this study was to capture each participant's story and individual interpretation of how they used their voice, how they perceived themselves and believe others perceived them, and how they created meaning from their experiences.

A narrative methodology was specifically chosen to capture the words, expressions, and perceptions of retired female superintendents. Seven participants were able to freely express themselves during a series of interviews and detail how they saw their past-selves and the development of their voices in the superintendent's role. Narratives are ways to empower and uncover the career stories and identities of the participants (Czarniawska, 2000). Czarniawska

(2000) references Mischler (1986) who uses narrative interviewing as a means to “recover and strengthen the voice of the lifeworld, that is, individual’s contextual understanding of their problems in their own terms” (Mischler, 1986, pp. 142-143). The purpose of this study was focused on empowering retired female superintendents to share their stories and perceptions about how their experiences impacted the development and use of their voices. This narrative study has the potential to reveal unknown truths of what it is like to be a female superintendent from a woman’s perspective and to contribute to current research on how this group of women can develop their own voices in positions traditionally held by men.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents and discover their perceptions of their voices in relationship to the critical moments they faced as women performing school superintendent responsibilities. History has created many societal structures and barriers that keep women in a particular place where their voices are expected to remain silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998). The research question is: How do female superintendents perceive their voices during critical moments in their careers and how do they explain to themselves and others how these experiences impacted the development of their voices? The question is connected to the problem of women being treated differently than men in our society (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998; Duerst- Lahti 2010; Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014; Francis, 2014; Superville, 2016), and the question seeks to discover how retired female superintendents explain how their experiences impacted the use of their voices. The question is supported by the research that women tend to be silent and passive because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than

asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997) and this study seeks to empower women to use their voices and be heard. The question is also linked to the fact the superintendent seat has been dominated by men for centuries (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2001; Brunner, 2012; Superville, 2016).

The interview protocol included the following questions:

- Describe yourself as a female superintendent.
- Tell me about a critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to that critical time, tell me about how you used your voice.
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.
- Describe for me how others saw you during that critical time.
- Do you think a female voice made or didn't make a difference during that critical time?
- Upon reflection would you use your voice differently during that critical time?
- Describe for me how you saw your voice change over the course of your superintendency.
- Can you describe in a word or two the voice that guided you through your career?
- Describe yourself as a female superintendent.
- Tell me about a critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to that critical time, tell me about how you used your voice.
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.
- Describe for me how others saw you during that critical time.
- Do you think a female voice made or didn't make a difference during that critical time?

- Upon reflection would you use your voice differently during that critical times?
- Describe for me how you saw your voice change over the course of your superintendency.
- Can you describe in a word or two the voice that guided you through your career?

In addition, participants were asked to share pre-existing work-related photographs of themselves upon which to reflect. Participants were asked to comment on what they were thinking at the time of the photograph and how their feelings impacted their use of voice:

- Tell me about this critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to the critical time in this picture, tell me about how you used your voice.
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.

Significance

This research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for them to share their perspectives on the development of their voices in a role traditionally held by men. This study is significant because there are no research studies examining the retired female superintendent's perspective of her story through the lens of critical moments and voice. This study provided a unique opportunity to empower retired female superintendents to share their stories and take a closer look at the culture within the phenomenon of being a female superintendent. The rationale for studying female superintendents' perceptions of the development and use of their own voice is connected to the fact women are only represented in 23% of all superintendent seats nationwide (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012) and the belief that "leadership is gendered and institutions are structures themselves that are also gendered" (Duerst-Lahti, 2010, p. 20). The rationale for this study is further supported

by the belief that retired superintendents had more time to dedicate to the self-reflection process involved with this study and they were in positions to be less worried about job security and therefore able to express their stories more freely.

A narrative study with seven retired female superintendents provided an opportunity to explore how some female superintendents functioned in a male dominated role. The information gathered has the potential to contribute to research on gender equity in public education and provide meaningful information to current superintendents, aspiring female leaders, School Boards, Departments of Education, and colleges and leadership preparation programs. There are no current research studies that focus on gathering the retired female superintendent's perspective of her lived experiences and how these experiences impacted her use of voice. Much of the current research on women's leadership is focused on external factors such as pay and benefits and does not take into consideration the use of voice when a female holds the executive position of power within public education.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory and Critical Theory were used to frame the exploration of how female superintendents perceive how their experiences impacted the use and development of their own voices. Both theories take into consideration historical and societal patterns that lead to positional power and dominance over women and both theories aim to liberate those who are oppressed. As a member of this group of female superintendents, I believe all leaders are challenged with managing the political landscapes within their school districts, yet women are at a particular disadvantage of being heard because of societal expectations expecting women to be silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998). Feminist theories take into consideration that women have a different psychological development

than men and take into consideration that women think, act, and use their voices differently (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997).

Critical and Feminists Theories were used to learn more about how the social and political landscape of the lived experiences of female superintendents impacted the development of their voices. “Critical theories aim to dig beneath the surface of social life and uncover the assumptions that keep us from a full and true understanding of how the world works” (Crossman, 2016, [“Understanding Critical Theory,” para.1](#)). Considering women are only represented by 23% in the superintendent role (U.S. Dept. Ed. 2012) and men have essentially created the role and dominated the seats of school superintendent for centuries (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004; Björk, 2000, p. 8; Blount, 1998; Blount, 1998; Glass, 2001; Brunner, 2012; Superville, 2016), it is important to provide women an opportunity to speak about how they are navigating the use of their own voice in a role designed by men.

Definitions of Key Concepts

Voice. For the purposes of this study, the definition of voice was defined through the research of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997). Their research on the development of a woman’s self-concept was ground breaking in that it explored the complex process women go through discovering their own identity and how relationships with others impacts a woman’s sense of self. The definition of voice is much more complex than simply talking; it is the way in which a woman sees herself, talks to herself, outwardly portrays her self-concept to others, how she responds to the world, how she silences herself, and how she thinks and behaves. Gilligan’s research informs us that gender impacts the way individuals use their voice and she infers males use their voice for self- promotion and women use their voice to help others (Gilligan, 1982). The definition of voice was used as a metaphor for the variety of

ways in for the variety of ways in which women are silent, speak, listen, act and develop their own concept of self (Gilligan, 1982). The definition of voice was purposely broad and designed not to influence the direction of each participant's narrative story. The participants were able to interpret the definition of voice on their own and express their own meanings to the word.

Critical Theory. Critical Theory is aimed at analyzing the particular societal assumptions that keep a marginalized group in a lesser position and empowering this group to move beyond the constraints placed on them. Critical theorist Madison (2005) reminds us that the researcher needs to be aware of their own power as they work with marginalized groups who have been struggling for positions of power (Creswell, 2013, p. 30). This study used Critical Theory to explore the stories of retired female superintendents and to examine if "historical problems of domination" (Creswell, 2013, p. 30) are perceived and reported by the participants.

Feminist Theory. Feminist Theory is aimed at taking the feminist perspective to analyze inequalities based on gender. The goal of taking a feminist research approach is to conduct "transformative" research centered on the exploration of "collaborative and non-exploitative relationships" (Creswell, 2013, p. 29). Feminist Theory aligns with Critical Theory in that it also looks at the theme of dominance and power positions in society. Feminist theorists, Lather (1991), Olesen (2011), Gilligan (1982), Stewart (1994), all take the stance that one's gender creates particular conditions that shape one's consciousness and life experiences. This study aimed to explore how retired female superintendents explain to themselves and others how their experiences impact the development and use of their voices.

Literature Review

Women dominate the field of education making up the “78% of central office administration, 52% of principals, and 76% of teachers” in the approximate 14,000 districts across this nation (Superville, 2016), yet there are only 23% of women serving as school superintendents (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012). “The U. S. Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as "... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004; Björk, 2000, p. 8). History has created many societal structures, expectations, and barriers that keep women in a particular place where their voices are expected to remain silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998). According to Gilligan (1982), women have difficulty listening to their inner voices and often choose to be silent because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions. The problem is we do not know how female superintendents are able to exert and develop their own voices as executive leaders when they are faced with societal expectations and other barriers expecting them to be silent or submissive. The question is: how do female superintendents perceive their voices during critical moments in their careers and how do they explain to themselves and others how these experiences impacted the development of their voices?

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents and discover their perceptions of their voices in relationship to the critical moments they faced as women performing the responsibilities associated with a position traditionally held by men. Participants were asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves and lived experiences to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. This action-based research had two main objectives: to hear the

voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men.

History of the Female Voice

History tells a particular story, one where women continue to be put in a lesser position than men and one where women are held to a different standard of behavior than men. It took 70 years of women advocating and fighting before men in the dominant positions of power approved the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote in 1920. The Woman's Suffrage movement serves as a significant political and social movement in terms of understanding the evolution of a woman's voice in society. Many courageous and persistent women faced jail time, went on hunger strikes and were abandoned by their husbands for fighting for the right to vote. "Between June and November 1917, 218 female protestors from 26 states were arrested and charged with "obstructing sidewalk traffic" outside the White House," for simply trying to have their voices heard (Library of Congress, August 28, 1917, ["Ten Suffragists Arrested While Picketing at the White House," para.2](#)). In 1917, men dominated all the positions of power and it was not socially acceptable to have women step outside of their role as wives and mothers to express their thoughts and opinions about their desire to obtain equal rights. As seen in the photographs from the Suffrage Movement men enforced different rules upon women and they were arrested for holding signs and standing on sidewalks. Men expected women to comply to their demands to be silent and when they did not they were pulled away with force and punished with jail time for trying to obtain equal rights in a society they lived and contributed in.

History continues to reiterate a particular pattern regarding how women can use their voices in society. One could surmise that women's voices still go unheard when they consider that advocates Alice Paul and Chrystal Eastman introduced the Equal Rights Amendment back in

1923 and it took 49 years for it to pass through Congress in 1972, and it still has not received the ratification from 38 states it needs to become Constitutional law (Francis, 2014). In 1972, a seven year deadline for ratification was extended to 1982 and at that time the following states had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment: Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia (Francis, 2014). Noting 5 states (Idaho, Kentucky, Nebraska, Tennessee and South Dakota) have tried to withdraw their original approval of the Equal Rights Amendment since 1972, reinforces that women's rights are still being questioned and challenged by many (Francis, 2014). Luckily for women, statutory law prohibits States from reversing their approval of the Equal Rights Amendment. Nevada recently ratified the Equal Rights Amendment on March 22, 2017, becoming the 36th State to ratify. Yet, with 45 years having passed since Congress originally sent the Equal Rights Amendment to the States, there is some controversy on whether or not obtaining two more State ratifications would pass the Equal Rights Amendment (Francis, 2014). Although it's 2018, many women are unaware that they are not afforded equal rights to men under the Constitution of the United States. Please see Figures 1 through 5 below.



Figure 1. March 20, 1907. A “Lancashire laisse” being escorted through the palace yard, in

Westminster Palace, London.”

Photographs from the Woman’s Suffrage Movement arrests retrieved from:

<https://mashable.com/2015/01/12/suffragettes-vs-police/> - LzCsh.PlqZqr



Figure 2. “May 21, 1914. Emmeline Pankhurst arrested by Superintendent Rolfe outside Buckingham Palace, London, in May 1914. Pankhurst was trying to present a petition to the king. “The Suffragette” newspaper reported that as she was driven away to Holloway Gaol, she called out, “Arrested at the gates of the palace. Tell the king!” Pankhurst was hailed several times during the fight to get women the vote. Rolfe died two weeks later of heart failure.”

Photographs from the Woman’s Suffrage Movement arrests retrieved from:

<https://mashable.com/2015/01/12/suffragettes-vs-police/> - LzCsh.PlqZqr



Figure 3. A female being physically attacked by several men during the Woman's Suffrage Movement.

Photographs from the Woman's Suffrage Movement arrests retrieved from: https://ichef-1.bbci.co.uk/news/624/cpsprodpb/2F9B/production/_85878121_blackfriday.jpg



Figure 4. A female being physically dragged by several men during the Woman's Suffrage Movement.

Photographs from the Woman's Suffrage Movement arrests retrieved from: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/6e/b6/70/6eb670b5300bc34543fcf22a5f33f275.jpg>

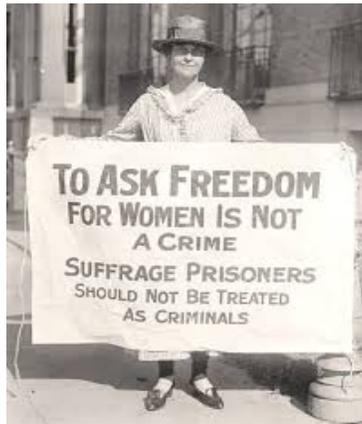


Figure 5. Woman's Suffrage Movement a fight for equal rights with signs and marches.

Photographs from the Woman's Suffrage Movement arrests retrieved from:

<http://lweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mnwp/160/160035v.jpg>

The problem is women continue to receive the message from society their individual voices do not matter and the only effective way for the female voices to be heard is when women ban together in large groups and protest. On January 21st, 2017, millions of women across this nation united together in Women's Marches to speak out against unequal rights, unfair pay, and the right to choose what to do with their own bodies. Even though 169 years have passed since the Woman's Suffrage Movement, women are still banning together and protesting to have their voices heard. While history and current events continue to demonstrate women's voices are treated differently than men's, this research study aimed to discover how retired female superintendents perceive their experiences in a role traditionally held by men and how these experiences impacted the use and development of their voices.

The Impact of Gender in the Workplace

In order to fully understand the question of how female superintendents perceive how their experiences impact the development of their own voice, the research on how gender impacts women in the workplace needs to be discussed. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report (2016) confirms women make less money than men and on an average they receive 83% of the median salary men receive for doing the same type of job. This report also notes women working in the field of education are compensated even less, making 78.6% of the median salary men receive in similar positions. Meir and Wilkins' research (2002) on female superintendent's compensation supports the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report and they concluded that female superintendents are paid approximately 5.5% less than men and receive 2% less of a raise than men for obtaining their doctorate (Kawaguchi, 2014). Contradicting these statistics, the 2006 Educational Research Service study revealed female superintendents made approximately \$9,000 more a year than their male counterparts (Long, 2010, p. 33).

Contradicting the 2016 U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, Meir and Wilkins (2002), Kawaguchi (2014) and the 2006 Educational Research Service study, Alan Long's (2010) mixed methods study found there is little statistical difference between female and male superintendent's salaries, interview experiences and contract negotiations. Using Androcentric Theory (the elevation of males in society), he tested the differences on salaries, interview experiences and contract negotiations between 82 female and 79 male superintendents in four different regions in the United States. The qualitative portion of his study examined the following variables with five open-ended questions: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, educational level, career data, years of experience, hours worked per week, number of years in educational leadership, career mentor, selection process, and district information. The

quantitative data portion of his study was collected through a questionnaire on educational experiences, salaries, interview experiences and contract negotiations. Long's research indicated there was a statistical significance in the educational degrees held between females and males; 37 females held doctoral degrees, 40 females held specialist degrees in comparison to 24 males with doctoral degrees and 41 males with specialist degrees (Long, 2010). While no statistical differences were noted between females and males on salary, interview experiences or contract negotiations, this research is important because it demonstrated women may be paid the same as men but they must work longer than men in central office positions before they are able to move into superintendent position; on average it takes 14.2 years for women versus 4.5 years for men to move into the superintendent role (Long, 2010). Another interesting detail from this study is that male superintendents appear to have more support available to them than female superintendents; on average 85% male superintendents and 62% females reported having mentors (Long, 2010).

While Long's research (2010) noted equal pay for female and male superintendents, Lisa Carroll's quantitative research (2014) on the compensation packages of Kentucky superintendents revealed female superintendents made more money than male superintendents but their benefit packages were greatly reduced. Contrary to Long's (2010) research, Carroll (2014) concluded gender negatively impacts the female superintendent's ability to be in position of power to negotiate equitable contracts. Carol studied 173 acting superintendents (139 men and 34 women) and revealed male superintendents in Kentucky received better insurance, longer contracts, more vacation days, annuities, and more perks than their female counterparts. While both Long (2010) and Carroll (2014) provide useful information on how gender impacts pay, interviews, negotiations, and benefits, this study has expanded upon their research to incorporate

the female superintendent's perception of how her experiences as a woman in a role traditionally held by men impacted the use and development of her voice.

To further understand the various types of barriers female superintendents face because of their gender, Kawaguchi (2014) conducted a mixed-methods research with 26 female superintendents in California. Kawaguchi (2014) utilized both surveys and interviewing to answer the question, "What barriers do women encounter while seeking and serving in the position of superintendent?" (Kawaguchi, 2014). Kawaguchi discovered 46 % of the participants reported the number one barrier they had to deal with was the discrimination they felt that was coming from the "Good Old Boys' Network" (Kawaguchi, 2014). In Kawaguchi's 2014 study, five female superintendents participated in one on one interviews and the following comments reveal their perceptions of how their gender impacted them at work:

- "I was the first women superintendent in my district so certainly being a female while pursuing this position was a barrier for me. For some reason, I was looked upon as not being able to handle the position" (p. 56).
- "You know, small school districts have the 'Good Old Boys' Network' often times and the path had been laid for somebody else to get the position. In so much that they made this other person the assistant superintendent just prior to the superintendent leaving to make the path a clearer road for him" (p. 59).
- "I was the first woman and minority in my district ever hired as superintendent. I sort of broke two ceilings: the glass one and the bamboo one. I think people are looking very carefully at my leadership because of the fact that I am the first woman and a minority, and I feel like I have to work harder than my predecessors on making the grade" (p. 25).

- “The whole gender thing was a barrier in my earlier years. I remember a board member saying to me, ‘We need you to be the boss.’ And I remember saying something like, ‘Tell me one thing that I haven’t done that you need. That what you’re really saying is you need me to stamp my feet and act mad.’ But she couldn’t identify anything that she really felt like I hadn’t taken on. But I think she perceived me not being the boss because I followed someone who was definitely the boss.”(p. 61).

Further research by Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) revealed high achieving women face barriers that limit their potential to grow within their organizations. A multi-year study was conducted with 25,000 Harvard Business Graduates and the results indicated men and women have similar career aspirations, yet men were more apt to achieve their dream jobs because they were placed in higher-level positions more readily than women, and given more direct reports even when they did not have the experience or education. Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) discovered women are not leaving positions to care for families, but they are leaving because they do not see prospects of moving ahead within their organizations. Understanding more about the types challenges, “gatekeepers” or “gender hierarchies” that existed in the lived experience of female superintendents may contribute to isolating specific types of supports current and aspiring female leaders need in order to be successful in the superintendent position.

Additional research informs us that gender does impact the way females are treated at work. Duerst- Lahti (2010) analyzed leadership in terms of gender and explored the process that women have to go through to get past the “gatekeepers” who act as “political elites” protecting positions of power for men. In her article, “The Consequences of Gender for Women’s Political Leadership,” Duerst-Lahti’s (2010) claims “leadership is culturally gendered toward the

masculine so women tend to have a harder time both seeing themselves as a leader and in being seen as a leader” (As cited in O’Connor, 2010, p. 23). Duerst-Lahti (2010) refers to all organizations as having their own personalities and noted most organizations support masculine tendencies. She recommends additional supports for women leaders and speaks to the need for specific training programs designed to address the political and social challenges women face as they move through “gender hierarchies” present in organizations. Much like Duerst-Lahti (2010), Niesche (2017) reported most leaders are not prepared for addressing the inequalities or biases within their organizations and claims most leaders are more concerned with following the established processes rather than challenging them or discovering their individual purpose. Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, and Silvernail (2005) also found that gender is a factor for female superintendents, but their research stands out because they recognize “that many female superintendents acknowledged no gender barriers existed in their attaining the superintendency” (p. 38). These various findings on how gender impacts females at work supported the further exploration of a qualitative narrative study on how retired female superintendents perceive how their experiences impacted their voices in a role traditionally held by men.

Personality Traits, Leadership Characteristics & Gender Roles

____ Personality traits, leadership characteristics, and the gender role assignments are additional themes that emerge when studying the question of how female superintendents explain to themselves and others how their experiences impact the use and development of their own voices. Personality traits can often be turned into stereotypical labels. For example, there is a common societal expectation that all women are assumed to be caretakers (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1988; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014). Society sends mixed messages based on one’s gender and women are

labeled aggressive when they use their voice in authoritarian ways, but men are labeled as strong and competent (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Further research indicates some women leaders respond to gender based norms by acting more masculine in order to be taken seriously (Jackson, Shirley, Irby, & Brown, 2011). Other research demonstrates female leaders rely on interconnectedness and interpersonal skills to be successful in their roles, while male leaders rely on command and control strategies and autonomy (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

Eagly and Karau's 2002 mixed methods research "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders," supports the need to learn more about the female superintendent's perspective about how her experiences impact the development of her voice. We know the role of a superintendent has been traditionally reserved for men and women have a harder time reaching and succeeding in this role (Blount, 1988; Glass, 2000). According to Eagly and Karau (2002), there is a "sparse representation of women in elite leadership roles" (p.573) and they "propose a role congruity theory of prejudice exists towards female leaders" (p. 573). Eagly and Karau (2002) claim prejudice develops more readily toward female executive leaders because there is often a discrepancy between what the assumed gender role behavior should be with the actual personality traits and leadership characteristics of the female leader. They noted that since 1972, the General Social Survey (GSS) has been collecting data on what Americans think about government, policy and change, and over the years this survey consistently reports that Americans prefer to have male leaders especially in political roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002, [p.580](#)). Society expects men to lead and women to follow and when female leaders exhibit personality traits or leadership characteristics associated with the male gender role, they face prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau's research (2002) claims female leaders are scrutinized in very different ways than male leaders. The actions and behaviors of female leaders are

examined through two very different lenses, the stereotypical gender role lens and the critical lens which measures how close or far apart a female leader's personality and leadership traits align to the preconceived stereotypical gender role assignment (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) point out "women leaders' choices are thus constrained by threats from two directions: Conforming to their gender role would produce a failure to meet the requirements of their leader role, and conforming to their leader role would produce a failure to meet the requirements of their gender role" (p. 576).

Further research corroborates Eagly and Karau's (2002) findings that women are measured against gender roles and personality traits. Young and Skria (2003) indicate that female leaders who demonstrate caring and collaborative personality traits in their leadership styles are automatically viewed as weak and ineffective managers. Brunner and Grogan's (2007) research demonstrates how women leaders themselves are using gender roles to measure their effectiveness; 1,195 female superintendents and assistant superintendents reported they felt the school boards that hired them saw them as unqualified managers simply because of their gender. Brunner and Grogan (2007), Duerst-Lahti (2010), and Kawaguchi (2014) recommend female leaders be given more supports and training to better understand the political and social challenges they will face because of their gender. Knowing a person's experiences in life can impact what they begin to tell themselves about their own abilities; this study asked participants to engage in a process of self-reflection regarding how their critical experiences impacted their concepts of self and use of their voices.

History has supported the societal norm that the role of a superintendent is viewed in context to male leadership characteristics not female leadership characteristics and this reality challenges female leaders with role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It is important to take a

closer look at the female superintendent's perceptions of her own experiences and how these experiences impact her own voice and actions. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), female leaders who are caring and collaborative may be interpreted as having soft female traits and in turn given less than perfect evaluations because of their innate personality traits are not masculine; and female leaders who take on male characteristics because they understand they need to measure up to the predetermined male standard associate with this role, may be labeled as aggressive and in turn given less than perfect evaluations because of their personality traits are not considered feminine enough. Research informs us that female leaders will take on more male characteristics in order to succeed, but in turn they are often criticized and negatively labeled as dragon lady, battle-ax or Attila the Hun (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Weinraub 1997; Genovese 1993; Tannen 1994). Much like, Young and Skiria's findings (2003), Eagly and Karau (2002) noted women's leadership abilities are viewed less favorably than men's, and the societal patterns that maintain these different expectations impact one's behaviors and beliefs about one's own personality and leadership traits.

Tisha Durrah's (2009) mixed methods research, "A study of gender based school leadership and its perceived influence on school climate," further supports the notion that women and men have different personality traits and leadership styles. Durrah (2009) conducted a mixed methods study with five male and five female secondary principals and their teachers to analyze the impact of leadership style on school climate. Durrah (2009) used the Leadership Practice Inventory (LPI), Observer Version and Self Version, developed by Kouzes and Posner (2003) to collect data from randomly selected teachers and principals. Kouzes and Posner developed the LPI to measure leadership practices of principals in 1995 and reformatted it in 1999 to include a 30 statements that can be rated a ten-point Likert scale to assess the to the following five

leadership practices: “Challenging the Process, Inspiring a Shared Leadership, Enabling Others to Act, Modeling the Way and Encouraging the Heart” (Kouzes & Posner (2003) as cited in Durrah, 2009, p. 38). The data revealed teachers identified male principals with the leadership style, “Challenge the Process” (Kouzes & Posner, (2003) as cited in Durrah, 2009, p. 38), with a mean of 8.66 and identified female principals with the leadership style, “Encourage the Heart” (Kouzes & Posner, (2003) as cited in Durrah, 2009, p. 38), with a mean of 8.12. The principals were asked to fill out a self-assessment on the Leadership Practice Inventory and the data revealed that male principals rated themselves with a mean of 9.20 for the leadership style, “Encourage the Heart” (Kouzes & Posner, (2003) as cited in Durrah, 2009, p. 38), while woman rated themselves with a mean of 8.60, for the leadership style, “Enable Others to Act” (Kouzes & Posner, (2003) as cited in Durrah, 2009, p. 38). The differences between the female and male principals’ self-assessment data and the teachers’ observational data on their leadership styles is noteworthy; male principals saw themselves as leaders who used their heart when teachers saw them as strong change agents; females saw themselves as leaders who helped others which aligned much closer to the teacher’s descriptions of themselves as leaders who used their heart (Durrah, 2009). Durrah’s study (2009) concluded the leadership style of secondary principals had no significant impact on school climate by using the ANOVA f test to measure the significance of principal leadership style and school climate. She compared the F observed (4, 10) = .547 and F critical = 3.48 and p = 7.10, and concluded the null hypothesis could be rejected because there was a significant value of p = .710 (Durrah, 2009).

While Durrah’s research (2009) demonstrates principal leadership did not impact school climate, her study is important because it specifically noted the differences between how females and males assessed their own leadership styles and how others perceived them. The knowledge

that there are differences between the ways male and female leaders assess themselves supports conducting a narrative study with seven retired female superintendents to explore their perceptions on how their experiences impacted the use and development of their own voices.

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory framed this research study because it supports the belief that women have been marginalized in society and they continue to be measured against male standards (Gilligan, 1982; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Genovese 1993; Tannen 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1988; Weinraub 1997; Glass, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Meir & Wilkins, 2002; Young & Skiria, 2003; Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, & Silvernail, 2005; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Durrah, 2009; Long, 2010; Jackson, Shirley, Irby, & Brown, 2011; Carroll, 2014; Duerst-Lahti, 2014; Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014; Francis, 2014; Kawaguchi, 2014; Superville, 2016). In her 2017 article titled, “What is Feminism Really About? Misconceptions and Reality,” Cole, (2017) informs us “the development of a feminist perspective and feminist theories have always been about de-centering the privileged white male perspective from framing social problems, the approach to studying them, how we actually study them, what we conclude about them, and what we try to do about them as a society” (p. 1). Cole (2017) refers to Patricia Collins as one of today’s most accomplished sociologists, in her article, and cites Collins’ belief, that “one is never simply just a woman or a man: one is defined by and operates within these other social constructs that have very real consequences that shape experiences, life chances, perspectives, and values” (p. 1). This research study used a feminist view to explore the perceptions and voices of a group of women who have been school superintendents to better understand what it is truly like to be a female in a role that is traditionally reserved for men. This research is complex and centers on the societal norms and

expectations that have been developed over time; women are treated less than men in our society (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998; Duerst- Lahti, 2010; Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014; Francis, 2014; Superville, 2016); women tend to be silent and passive because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997); and for centuries the superintendent seat has been dominated by men (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2001; Brunner, 2012; Superville, 2016).

A feminist approach was necessary to fully approach and understand the question about how female superintendents explain to themselves and to others how their experiences impact the development of their own voices. The research of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule (1997) laid the groundwork of understanding the exploration of one's voice. The definition of voice is much more complex than simply talking: it is the way in which a woman sees herself, talks to herself, outwardly portrays her self-concept to others, how she responds to the world, how she silences herself, and how she thinks and behaves (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997). Gilligan conducted three important studies: "Moral Development in the College Years" (1981), "A Naturalistic Study of Abortion Decisions" (1980) and "Development from Adolescence to Adulthood" (1979). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule conducted a five year study on the lived experiences of many women to examine the connection between the use of one's voice, self-imposed silence, and the various stages of a woman's self-actualization process. It was repeatedly discovered that women relate to the world through their relationships with others and they measure themselves by their ability to maintain connection to others, in comparison to men who relate to the world by focusing on their individual needs and measure themselves by asserting their independence

(Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Gilligan explains the dramatic differences in the ways men and women view and respond to the world by exploring the development of morality; she claims, “women operate within a morality of responsibility and care” and “men operate within a morality of blind impartiality” (As cited in Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 8). Gilligan’s research (1982) is grounded in the belief that “the conflict between self and others constitutes the central moral problem for women” (p. 71).

Gilligan (1982) pointed out that women have been missing as research subjects and when they were studied they were measured against male standards of development, which resulted in data that did not truly reflect the truth about a woman’s position or her development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p.6). Gilligan (1982) noted that Freud had a negative view of women because he thought they “show less sense of justice than men, they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, and they are more often influenced in their judgments by feeling of affection or hostility” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 7; Freud, 1925, pp. 257-258). Gilligan also examined the work of Piaget (1968), Erickson (1968) and Kohlberg (1969) to demonstrate that their views and measurements on the psychological stages of development of females came from a very structured male lens, which was not applicable to females. McClelland (1975) supported the differences between males and females and noted there was a tendency to “regard male behavior as the ‘norm’ and female behavior as some kind of deviation from that norm” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 14; McClelland, 1975, p. 81). He further claimed, “sex role as the most important determinant of human behavior” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 14; McClelland, 1975, p. 81). Gilligan’s research (1982) was groundbreaking in that it showed how the psychological and moral development of women was different than men’s.

Gilligan (1982), Chodrow (1974) and Lever (1976) expanded upon the limited views

male theorists had on the development of women during this time. Gilligan (1982) referenced the work of Chodrow (1974) and Lever (1976) to show how male theorists repeatedly assumed females were unable to develop because they had difficulty separating themselves from others (Gilligan, 1982, p. 9). Chodrow (1974) attributed the differences between male and females to “fact that women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care and as a result, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 7; Chodrow, 1974, pp. 43-44). Chodrow (1974) claimed there was a fusion process between mothers and daughters that did not exist between mothers and sons: “mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with themselves” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 7). Chodrow (1974) saw this as the primary reason females are threatened by separation and the reason males strive independence. Lever (1976) conducted a study with 181 fifth-grade children, and discovered that boys were able to play for longer times and they were able to resolve disputes more quickly, and girls often ended the games instead of dealing with the conflict (Gilligan, 1982, p. 9). Lever (1976) concluded that girls’ sensitivity toward conflict and their internal need to maintain cohesiveness and calmness stays with women as they develop into adulthood. She inferred there “is little market value” for feelings in the workplace and suggested “if a girl does not want to be left dependent on men, she will have to learn to play like a boy” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 10). Lever’s research (1976) connects to Eagly and Karau’s findings (2002) of women being caught in a dilemma of measuring up to gender roles or performing like a man to get the job done. Noting the history on gender role research (Lever, 1976; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Young and Skria, 2003; Brunner and Grogan, 2007; Durrah, 2009; Jackson, Shirley, Irby, & Brown, 2011) this study engaged participants in a process of self-reflection on their past-selves and lived experiences to share their

current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. This study can contribute to the research on assigned gender roles in the superintendent field.

Through her research, Gilligan explored the complex viewpoints women have on their world. Gilligan examined the internal and external voices women listen to and she explored the self-talk and reasoning processes women have in their various stages of self-awareness. Gilligan was first to define voice as metaphor for the ways in which women are silent, speak, listen, act and develop their own concept of self (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule's research looked at the process of one's voice and the actions of being silent in relationship to women's psychological development. In their research, they examined the stories of women at various points in their lives when they were faced with making critical decisions about how they would use their voices most effectively to maintain relationships and be heard. Much like their research, this study was focused on obtaining the authentic stories from seven retired female superintendents, to learn more about their perceptions of how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers.

Critique

The research mentioned in the literature review is focused on demonstrating women are a minority and treated differently than men (Gilligan, 1982; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Genovese 1993; Tannen 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1988; Weinraub 1997; Glass, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Meir & Wilkins, 2002; Young & Skiria, 2003; Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, & Silvernail, 2005; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Durrah, 2009; Long, 2010; Jackson, Shirley, Irby, & Brown, 2011; Carroll, 2014; Duerst-Lahti, 2014; Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014; Francis, 2014; Kawaguchi, 2014; Superville, 2016). The only research mentioned to contradict this viewpoint was Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, and

Silvernail's (2005) research that disclosed, "that many female superintendents acknowledged no gender barriers existed in their attaining the superintendency" (p. 38). Feminist Theory and Critical Theory have been chosen because they come from the viewpoints that gender inequity and power and dominance impact a person's experience and self-concept. The assumptions of these two theories are based in the researcher's belief that gender bias exists and power-relations exist for female superintendents. A qualitative narrative study on the voices of female superintendents has been conducted to learn more about seven retired female superintendent's perceptions of their experiences, gender bias, power-relations and the development of their voice and concept of self.

Summary

In summary, we know that a woman's voice has been diminished in society (Gilligan, 1982; Blount, 1988; Francis, 2014; Women's Suffrage Movement, Equal Rights Amendment, Women's Marches) and because of this societal reality, women continue to receive lesser treatment than men (Gilligan, 1982; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Genovese 1993; Tannen 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1988; Weinraub 1997; Glass, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Meir & Wilkins, 2002; Young & Skiria, 2003; Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, & Silvernail, 2005; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Durrah, 2009; Long, 2010; Jackson, Shirley, Irby, & Brown, 2011; Carroll, 2014; Duerst-Lahti, 2014; Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014; Francis, 2014; Kawaguchi, 2014; Superville, 2016). Furthermore, we know that women tend to be silent and passive because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), and for centuries the superintendent seat has been dominated by men (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2001; Brunner, 2012; Superville, 2016). There is a particular level of urgency to better understand how

women in this profession function because females are a minority making up less than a quarter of all superintendent seats nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012). Knowing that people's experiences in life can impact what they begin to tell themselves about their own abilities, this study asked participants to engage in a process of self-reflection regarding how their critical experiences impacted their concepts of self and use of their voices. This is important because we need to know more about how female superintendents use their voice to address the complex educational problems in today's schools.

Methodology

A qualitative narrative research approach was chosen to explore the voices and lived experiences of seven retired female superintendents to learn more about how this group perceives how their experiences impact the development of their voices. A narrative approach provides the means to gather the oral histories of the female superintendents' authentic perspectives of their own experiences and enables participants to share their own words, thoughts, and feelings. A narrative inquiry recognizes there are multiple realities and provides the framework for using open-ended questions to explore the research question: How do female superintendents perceive their voices during critical moments in their careers and how do they explain to themselves and others how these experiences impacted the development of their voices? A narrative approach supports an interactive process where the researcher works with the participants to discover the meaning, themes and patterns that emerge from the words and stories shared. This action-based research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men.

As a female researcher, I have 20 years working in the field of education with the last eight years serving as a school superintendent. I have chosen to study the female superintendent's use of voice during critical moments through a narrative methodology because I believe there is much to learn from listening to the individual stories of female superintendents and there is no current day research on this topic. As a member of this group, I believe women

have different experiences than men in this role and I am curious to learn how women in this role reflect upon the use of their voice during critical moments in their careers. In light of the research that informs us women tend to be silent and passive because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), I believe studying retired female superintendents' perspectives of how their experiences impacted the use of their voice may provide meaningful information regarding gender, leadership and equity in the superintendent role.

It has been my personal experience as a female superintendent there is a particular code of silence amongst female superintendents and women in this role do not openly discussing the challenges they face. I have chosen a narrative approach because it provides a way to gather the social and emotional complexities of an individual's story as "narrative stories tell of individual experiences and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves" (Creswell, 2013, p. 71). This study sought to learn more about the various ways female superintendents describe their stories, share their perceptions of their past selves, and describe their use of voice during critical moments in their careers. Given the current times and the "Me Too" movement where hundreds of women are breaking the code of silence and coming forward with their stories of sexual harassment, I believe this study comes at a critical time in our society where women are feeling a bit more supported and encouraged to break the code of silence and speak freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Retired female superintendents were specifically chosen as research subjects because it was assumed they would be more willing to openly share the stories of critical moments in their careers because they no longer had to worry about job security, and they had more time and energy to engage in a process of deep self-reflection.

This research study was designed to better understand the lived experiences of female superintendents and to discover how women in this role use their voice during critical moments in their careers. "The U.S. Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as "... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004). Duerst- Lahti's (2010) claims, "leadership is culturally gendered toward the masculine so women tend to have a harder time both seeing themselves as a leader and in being seen as a leader" (O'Connor, 2010, p. 23). The purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of retired superintendents and discover how they described and created meaning of the critical moments in their superintendency.

Methodology and Rationale

As a superintendent and the researcher, a qualitative narrative approach was selected because it aligns with my ontological philosophical assumption that there are multiple perspectives and realities associated with the lived experiences of the female superintendent. "In narrative research, a key theme has been the turn toward the relationship between the researcher and the researched in which both parties will learn and change in the encounter" (Creswell, 2015, p. 75). As the researcher and a female superintendent, my position as an "insider" equipped me with a unique understanding of the phenomenon of being a female superintendent, which in turn assisted with creating a safe and collaborative working relationship with participants (Creswell, 2015). A narrative inquiry recognizes there are multiple realities and provided the framework for using open-ended questions to explore how retired female superintendents explain to themselves and others how their experiences during critical moments influenced the use and the development of their voice. Narrative research also requires the researcher to dedicate extended periods of time to listening and re-listening to the oral histories and recollections of participants.

This process “consists of gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). According to Creswell (2013), “the goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation,” and “often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 24-25). This study used a narrative approach to learn more about the multiple perspectives and realities associated with the lived experiences of the female superintendents. Knowing that history has created many societal structures, expectations, and barriers that keep women silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998), this study has the potential to challenge the existing societal expectation that the role of a superintendent is reserved for men and empower women in this role to speak freely about their experiences as female superintendents.

Research Design, Participants, & Sampling

A narrative approach was used to discover multiple views of a female superintendent’s realities and promoted an interactive process for the researcher to work with the participants to discover the meaning and themes that emerge through the sharing of their stories. According to Chase (2005), “narratives are composed interactively between researchers and participants and the interpretations are developed by various narrators” (As cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 72). The process of gathering the stories of seven retired female superintendents included spending considerable amounts of time with each participant, observing them, interviewing them, and collecting various sources of data related to how they used their voices in their roles. A safe and trusting relationship was built between the researcher and participants so participants could engage in a self-reflection process of looking back at the critical moments in their careers. The use of narrative analysis allows the “researcher to take an active role and ‘restory’ the stories into

a framework that makes sense” (Creswell, 2013, p. 74). My own story, perceptions, and experiences were not discussed with participants, yet my personal experiences as a female superintendent provided me a unique understanding of how best to provide a safe environment for the participants to share their authentic stories and thoughts in.

This narrative research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men. I conducted a pilot study and through purposeful and convenience sampling selected three retired female superintendents to test out the interview protocols for this study. The pilot study helped to establish validity and reliability of the methods and measurements used in this research study. As a member of the New Hampshire School Superintendents Association (NHSSA) and the Massachusetts Superintendents Association (M.A.S.S.), I obtained permission to access their list serves and sent an email invitation to retired female superintendents with a brief description and rationale for the pilot study. Participants who volunteered signed consent forms and filled out a demographic survey and were given the opportunity to engage in conversations with the researcher to ask any clarifying questions regarding this study. The sample population received an electronic synopsis of the methods and I met with three participants to conduct interviews using the interview protocols. Feedback from the sample population was used to improve the interview protocols. There was a minimum of four hours dedicated by each participant over a one-month period of time for the pilot study. The process included: one hour long interview, one to two hours for travel time, and two hours for consulting back and forth regarding their feedback on the interview protocols.

Purposeful and convenient sampling was used to locate four to eight retired female superintendents to volunteer to participate in this research study. Retired female superintendents

were chosen because it was assumed they would have ample experiences of critical moments in their careers to reflect upon, the time to share their stories for this study, and the motivation to engage in deep self-reflection. Similar to the process taken to find a sample population, I accessed the New Hampshire School Superintendent's and the Massachusetts Superintendents Association's list serves to find volunteers. I had 18 initial responses to participate in this study, but only seven completed the informed consent and could commit to the time necessary for the research process. All 18 potential candidates received an invitation to participate, a brief description of the purpose of this study, the methods used in the study, how the data would be kept secure, how the data would be used at the end of the study, consent forms, and a demographic survey. All 18 original volunteers were given the opportunity to engage in conversations with the researcher to ask any clarifying questions regarding this study. If more than a total of eight volunteers had occurred, the selection process would have been based on the number of years females had been in the role of superintendents, and eight of the longest standing female superintendents would have randomly been chosen. As it turned out, only seven participants were able to dedicate the time necessary to participate, and all of them signed the informed consent forms and were able to dedicate the minimum of 30 hours over a 10-month period for this research study. This time included: three interviews estimated to be about one and a half hours long, one to two hours of travel time for the interviews, and a minimum of 19 hours of consulting back and forth with the researcher to ensure the meaning of their words and their stories had been captured accurately. The time period for the data collection and data analysis was 10 months, January through October 2018. This amount of time provided the opportunity for prolonged engagement with each participant and ample time to verify that each individual participant's words and stories were captured from correctly.

The design of the data collection process consisted of gathering data from interviews, conversations, other documents as identified and shared by participants such as work-related photographs, newsletters, and newspaper articles. All participants were given pseudonyms and any identifiable information about the school districts they worked for was not disclosed. Participants were asked to bring pre-existing work-related photographs to the last interview and these photographs were used as prompts to explore each participant's descriptors about her voice at the time of the photograph. Four out of seven participants shared pre-existing work related photographs and their thoughts about that time period. Interviews were taped and field notes were taken during and after each interview and throughout the data analysis process. There were three interviews for five participants and two interviews with two participants and the data collection process took six months. All the interviews were transcribed and descriptive codes emerged from each individual story. The researcher analyzed each individual story first and participants took an active role with verifying the presentation of their stories and words. The researcher purposefully conferred back and forth with each individual participant to ensure the trustworthiness, creditability, transferability, dependability, confirmability of the data collected and this process took.

After the individual data analysis for each participant, the overall data was analyzed from the seven participants for emerging themes and patterns. The researcher then re-analyzed the nineteen interviews as a whole and used NVivo12 to conduct a systematic analysis of the text data. The text data was imported, analyzed and explored for overall emerging patterns. The emerging patterns became nodes and these provided the researcher new avenues to explore the overall data and discover common themes.

Setting

Individual participants chose the setting for their interviews to ensure they felt comfortable and safe enough to share their stories. The locations for the interviews ranged from a participant's living room, kitchen, or home office, to a conveniently located diner or local eatery, to a public library. Some participants chose to meet outside of their hometown or city because they wanted to assist with shortening the traveling distance for the researcher. Although every participant met in person with the researcher, there were a few unforeseen circumstances when the interviews had to occur over the phone.

Informed Consent

The informed consent form for this research study on the Listening to the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents complied with the required elements noted by Creswell (2015, p. 153):

- The right of participants to withdraw voluntarily at any time,
- The purpose of the study and the procedures to be used to collect data,
- The protection of the confidentiality of participants,
- The known risks associated with participating in the study,
- The expected benefits to accrue to the participants in the study, and
- The signatures of the participants and the researcher.

The informed consent form can be located in Appendix C.

Variables

Although there are few risks associated with a narrative study, as the researcher, I was prepared for unknown risks that could potentially evolved through the self-reflection process in which participants were asked to engage. The process of self-reflection is unknown and there

was the possibility participants would not immediately recognize they did not want to openly discuss their personal thoughts regarding their leadership experiences and development of their voice, until after they shared a situation involving a negative memory. The researcher reviewed the informed consent form with each participant and the informed consent form detailed the research question, process and purpose of the study, so each participants could judge for themselves whether they wanted to openly discuss the critical moments in their career and their perspectives on the development of their voice. As the researcher, I was ready to provide the names of licensed counselors based on each participant's location, to any participant in need of additional supports because a negative memory initiated some type of post-traumatic stress. This did not occur and was not necessary for this study. The informed consent purposefully included a statement to inform participants they should not reveal anything that could cause or refer to a legal issue. I was also prepared to warn participants during any interview against speaking about non-public legal or personnel issues, or subject matter not related to the main research question on how they used their voice during critical moments of their career. At no point during any of the interviews, did a participant reference a non-public legal or personnel matter or share experiences that were not relevant to the use of their voices during critical moments in their careers.

Another variable in this study revolved around each participant's ability to trust the researcher and to engage in her own self-reflective process of looking back on her career as a female superintendent. I was prepared for the variations in the ways each participant would feel regarding her own vulnerability and ability to openly share their experiences. As the researcher, I understood that I had to do my best to establish a safe and trusting environment in order for each participant to fully engage in her own process of self-reflection. The self-reflection portion of

this study was an essential component to collecting the details and descriptors of how each participant used her voice during the critical moments her career. All seven participants were able to ask any questions with regards to the process before the study began and throughout the entire study period. Participants were given pseudonyms and their locations of school districts were not disclosed. Participants were also aware they could have withdrawn from the study at anytime.

Data Collection

Data was collected from three retired female superintendents for the pilot study and seven retired female superintendents for the research study. All participants received a synopsis of the methods and interview protocols to review and signed the consent forms. The pilot study participants participated in one individual interview and were asked to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the methods and interview protocols to be used. This research study focused on collecting the narrative stories of seven retired female superintendents. There were three interviews for five participants and two interviews with two participants. Participants were asked to share pre-existing work-related photographs at the last interview. Four out of seven participants shared pre-existing work related photographs and their thoughts about that time period. The photographs served as prompts at the last interview to collect more information about the participant's story and how she used her voice during the captured moments.

The interviews were informally structured to ensure each participant felt comfortable to express her own stories. The following interview protocol questions were used:

- Describe yourself as a female superintendent.
- Tell me about a critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to that critical time, tell me about how you used your voice.

- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.
- Describe for me how others saw you during that critical time.
- Do you think a female voice made or didn't make a difference during that critical time?
- Upon reflection would you use your voice differently during that critical time?
- Describe for me how you saw your voice change over the course of your superintendency.
- Can you describe in a word or two the voice that guided you through your career?
- Describe yourself as a female superintendent.
- Tell me about a critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to that critical time, tell me about how you used your voice.
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.
- Describe for me how others saw you during that critical time.
- Do you think a female voice made or didn't make a difference during that critical time?
- Upon reflection would you use your voice differently during that critical times?
- Describe for me how you saw your voice change over the course of your superintendency.
- Can you describe in a word or two the voice that guided you through your career?

In addition, four of the participants shared and examined pre-existing work-related photographs of themselves and commented on what they were thinking at the time of the photograph and how that impacted their use of voice. The following interview protocol questions were used:

- Tell me about this critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to the critical time in this picture, tell me about how you used your voice.
- How did your thoughts and feelings impact the use of your voice?
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.

Data Analysis

According to Saldaña (2016) “in a qualitative analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or ‘translates’ data and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes” (p. 4). The qualitative data collection process consisted of gathering data from interviews, conversations, other documents as identified and shared by participants such as work-related photographs, newsletters, and newspaper articles. The process of gathering the stories of seven retired female superintendents included spending considerable amounts of time with each participant, observing them, interviewing them, and capturing their feelings and thoughts through recorded interviews and field notes. Every interview was recorded and field notes were taken. After each interview, the researcher compared field notes with the recorded words. When all the interviews were complete, they were transcribed and re-listened to multiple times to accurately capture the words, phrases, and meanings behind each participant’s story. The transcribed interviews were coded and descriptive codes emerged within each individual story. The researcher analyzed each individual participant’s story first and provided each participant the opportunity to take an active role with verifying the content and meaning of their stories and words. The initial part of analyzing and writing each individual participant’s story took eight months. The researcher

purposefully took this extended period of time to ensure ample time for reflection and conferring back and forth with each individual participant, to ensure the trustworthiness, creditability, transferability, dependability, confirmability of the data collected. Individual themes emerged through the analysis of each individual participant's story and assisted with the identification of each person's story.

After seven individual stories were told and transcribed, each participant had the opportunity to verify her story and the individual theme associated with the story. The researcher then began the process of analyzing the results of the interview questions to discover if there were any overall themes and patterns that existed across the interviews. The researcher started by analyzing the re-occurring words and phrases from the results of each question in the nineteen transcribed interviews. To assist with this process, the researcher used NVivo 12 to discover any thematic categories and/or patterns. Thirteen nodes emerged from a thorough analysis of the interviews. These nodes aligned with the interview questions:

- Descriptions of self.
- Descriptions of critical moments in your career.
- Descriptions of how you used your voice.
- Descriptions of how you think others saw you.
- Reflections on your career and details on whether you would use your voice differently.
- Reflections on your feelings and thoughts when looking at pre-existing photographs or simply thinking about your past.
- Descriptions of the trajectory of your voice over your career.
- Reflections on your favorite position as an educator.

- Reflections on whether you would change anything if you could.
- Descriptions of your move into the superintendent role.
- Descriptions of the voice that guided you thorough your career.
- Reflections on the process of being a participant in a self-reflection study.
- Reflections on whether you think a female voice made or did not make a difference during the critical moments in your career.

The nodes became avenues for a closer examination of each interview and another source for chunking the data and examining the results. The in-depth exploration of the nodes provided the researcher more information on both the individual participants and assisted with discovering eleven overall themes that summarized commonalities of how female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers. The data analysis process was circular in that it began by closely examining the words and phrases for each participant and working closely with individual participants to create their stories, to moving to the overall analysis of the interviews and an examination of overall themes, to returning to the individual participant's words and phrases as exposed through the examination of the thirteen nodes that emerged.

Saldaña reminds us that all researchers bring forth their individual perceptions and subjectivity in the data collection and analysis process (2016, p. 8), and for that reason researchers need to pay "meticulous attention to language and images and engage in deep reflection of the emergent patterns and meanings of human experiences" (2016, p. 12). As the researcher and female superintendent, I kept a journal to track my own assumptions, thoughts, and feelings throughout this research study to keep my own story, interpretations, and biases separate from the participants' stories. Saldaña (2016) details the need for ongoing

communication and collaboration between the researcher and participants to ensure the codes and emergent themes are accurately portrayed and detailed in the data analysis process. The research methods for this study included eight months of time for the researcher and participants to re-engage in conversations to clarify the participant's meaning of their words and stories. Saldaña (2016) quotes Sipe and Ghiso (2004, pp. 482-483) noting, "all coding is a judgement call" and as previously referenced "in narrative research, a key theme has been the turn toward the relationship between the researcher and the researched in which both parties will learn and change in the encounter" (Creswell, 2015, p. 75). Qualitative research analysis requires the researcher to engage in an ongoing process of checking the meaning of the codes, patterns, and themes discovered from the participants as well as the codes, patterns, and themes of their own perceptions and subjectivity. For the reasons mentioned by Saldaña (2016), Sipe and Ghiso (2004), Creswell (2015), and Pinnegar & Daynes (2007), as the researcher I engaged in analytic memoing to keep my thoughts and inferences separate during the data analysis process. Saldaña (2016) references Thorberg and Charmaz (2014, p. 163) and claims coding and analytic "memos are about creating an intellectual workplace for the researcher."

The analysis of this data incorporated Saldaña's (2014) approach to data condensation, data display, and forming conclusions with verifications (p. 12). The conceptual framework of this study evolved over time and the first draft of the conceptual framework is noted in Figure 6, Initial Conceptual Framework, which captures the simple process of the study and the unknown results. The second draft of the conceptual framework is noted in Figure 7, Developed Conceptual Framework (p.63), which was created during the data analysis process. The Developed Conceptual Framework (p.63), captures a much more detailed understanding of the

external and internal factors influencing each participant's story, and will be discussed in the Discussion chapter.

Figure 6: Initial Conceptual Framework



Saldaña's (2016) technique of "code weaving" was used to put the data analysis puzzle together in a meaningful way. Saldaña (2016) details how drawing visual diagrams can assist with developing the meanings behind the codes and patterns. The relationship between the researcher and participants is interwoven and "code weaving" provided the researcher with a visual tool to begin to see how "diagrams of network relationships between and among concepts"

are connected (Saldaña, 2016, p. 48). As noted, there were a total of nineteen interviews (three interviews for five participants and two interviews with two participants) and approximately eight months of time allocated for reflection and conferring back and forth with participants.

The researcher analyzed each individual participant's story first and during this phase, individual themes emerged for each participant and these individual themes assisted with identifying each participant. During the process of analyzing the individual stories, it became evident the following broad thematic categories would assist with framing the re-telling of each participant's story: Background, Self-Reflection, Gender, and Voice. Only four participants shared pre-existing work-related photographs at their last interview and "descriptive coding" (Saldaña, 2016) was used to capture the "mood and tone" as participants described their experiences while reflecting upon images of themselves at work. After each individual participant's story was written and verified through with the participants, the researcher then re-examined all the interview data from the seven participants. The researcher re-listened to all interviews, re-examined field notes, reflected upon the structure of each story (Background, Self-Reflection, Gender, and Voice), and used NVivo 12 to further explore the data for overall themes or patterns. Eleven themes emerged to reflect how female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers. These eleven themes were then analyzed and sorted into three categories to explain how female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers.

Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

To ensure reliability, validity, trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability, the researcher engaged in ongoing communications with each participant to check for an accurate understanding of their words, phrases and story. There was an eight-month period after the

interviews were completed for the researcher to ask clarifying questions to participants during the data analysis process. This extended time period provided participants the ability to clarify the meaning of their words, phrases and ensure the researcher's interpretation of their story was an accurate reflection of their intended meaning. The researcher established ongoing communications with each participant after each interview through phone calls and emails to ensure the data collected and transferred accurately. As Saldaña (2016) notes with qualitative research collaboration must exist between the researcher and participants. To that end, participants engaged in the active process of verifying the accuracy of the final presentation of their story and the individual themes that emerged and were associated to their story. This collaborative process helped to ensure the reliability, validity, trustworthiness, creditability, and transferability of each participant's data. The use of narrative analysis allows for the "researcher to take an active role and 'restory' the stories into a framework that makes sense" (Creswell, 2013, p. 74). As the researcher and member of this group, I was acutely aware of the importance of establishing a trusting relationship with each participant so that participants felt safe to enter a self-reflective zone during and after their interviews. It is my belief the collaborative process of conferring back and forth with participants to check for understanding assisted with creating an authentic narrative story for each participant and this process could be transferred to a similar qualitative narrative study.

Storage

Informed consent forms, demographic surveys, field notes, photographs, and all data related to this study are securely stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office. The electronic data is stored on a password protected computer and hard drive. The raw data will be kept for five years and will be destroyed after May, 2024.

Limitations of the Study

The following list captures some of the potential limitations associated with a qualitative narrative study focused on listening to the stories of retired female superintendents and how they use their voices in critical moments in their careers:

- The small number of participants.
- The pilot study could provide the researcher with a completely different perspective on the methods chosen to explore the research topic.
- Participants may not have the desire or energy to participate in a study that requires them to invest time in the self-reflection process of exploring how their experiences impact the development of their voice.
- Participants may not want to openly discuss and share their personal thoughts and perceptions regarding their leadership experiences.
- Participants may not trust the researcher or the research process.
- An inability to promise complete anonymity to participants even though pseudonyms were used and locations of participants are not disclosed. (Participants were informed of this limitation in the consent form).
- The possibility the researcher's knowledge as an insider could interfere with establishing relationships with the participants. (Participants were informed of this limitation in the consent form).
- The possibility participants withdraw in the midst of the data collection process.
- The racial demographics may be limited based on the selected small number of participants for this narrative study.

Results

This chapter first presents information from the pilot study with three retired female superintendents and then presents results from a comprehensive qualitative narrative research study with seven retired female superintendents. The focal research question was: How do female superintendents explain to themselves and to others how their experiences impact the development of their own voices? The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of seven retired female superintendents and discover their stories and descriptions of how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. Participants were asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves, lived experiences, and pre-existing photographs of themselves, and to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. This action-based research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men. The results of this study will be presented in the following order; 1) information from the pilot study; 2) details from the seven participants' individual stories; 3) the overall themes that emerged from analyzing the seven participants' individual stories; and 4) the three categories that emerged from a thorough analysis of the data collected.

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted with three retired female superintendents: Patti, Brady, and Marge (all pseudonyms). The participants for the pilot study received a synopsis of the methodology and interview protocols to review and consent forms to sign. The pilot study

participants then participated in one individual interview and were asked to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the methodology, interview protocols, and process. Their feedback was used to modify the structure of some of the questions on the demographic survey and to refine the interview protocol questions. All three of the pilot participants provided positive feedback with regard to the overall research question and the self-reflection process associated with this study. The pilot study process provided the researcher with critical information to improve the data collection process and methodology used to learn more about how retired female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers. The demographic data collected from the three participants for the pilot study is displayed in Table 1, Pilot Study Demographic Data.

Table 1

Pilot Study Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Race	Age you became a Superintendent	Total years working as a Superintendent	Total years working in Education	Highest Degree
Patti	White	40	21	38	Doctorate
Brady	-	54	11	28	Doctorate
Marge	White	51	10	34	Doctorate

Pseudonym	Number of Districts as Superintendent	Years in one district as Superintendent	Type of District	Average Number of Students
Patti	4	-	Suburban	1,500/4,000/3,300/2,200
Brady	2	7	Suburban/Rural	-
Marge	2	7	Urban/Suburban	-

Pseudonym	Position held before becoming a Superintendent	Predecessor Male or Female	Did you receive a higher or lower salary than your predecessor	Currently Working in the Field of Education
Patti	Assistant Superintendent	2 Males/ 2 Females	Varied	Yes

Brady	Assistant Superintendent	Males	Higher	No
Marge	Assistant Superintendent	Males	Higher	Yes

The Study

The exploration of the multiple realities that exist for female superintendents are presented through the individual narrative stories of Annie, Fionna, Joanne, Lisa, Margaret, Ruth, and Sarah (all pseudonyms). Table 2, Demographic Data of the Participants in the Study, lists the position held before becoming a superintendent, if predecessor was a male or female, if the female superintendent received a higher salary than her predecessor, the type of district, and the number of students in the participant’s districts. The demographic data was supplemental to the data gathered from the interviews and is presented to provide readers with additional important information about each participant.

Table 2

Demographic Data of Participants in the Study

Pseudonym	Race	Age you became a Superintendent	Total years working as a Superintendent	Total years working in Education	Highest Degree
Fionna	White	53	8	37	Doctorate
Annie	Human	62	3	43	CAGS
Lisa	White	51	9	32	Doctorate
Sarah	White	55	9	43	Doctorate
Joanne	White	51	14	44	Doctorate
Margaret	White	49	12	42	Doctorate
Ruth	White	62	3	40	Doctorate

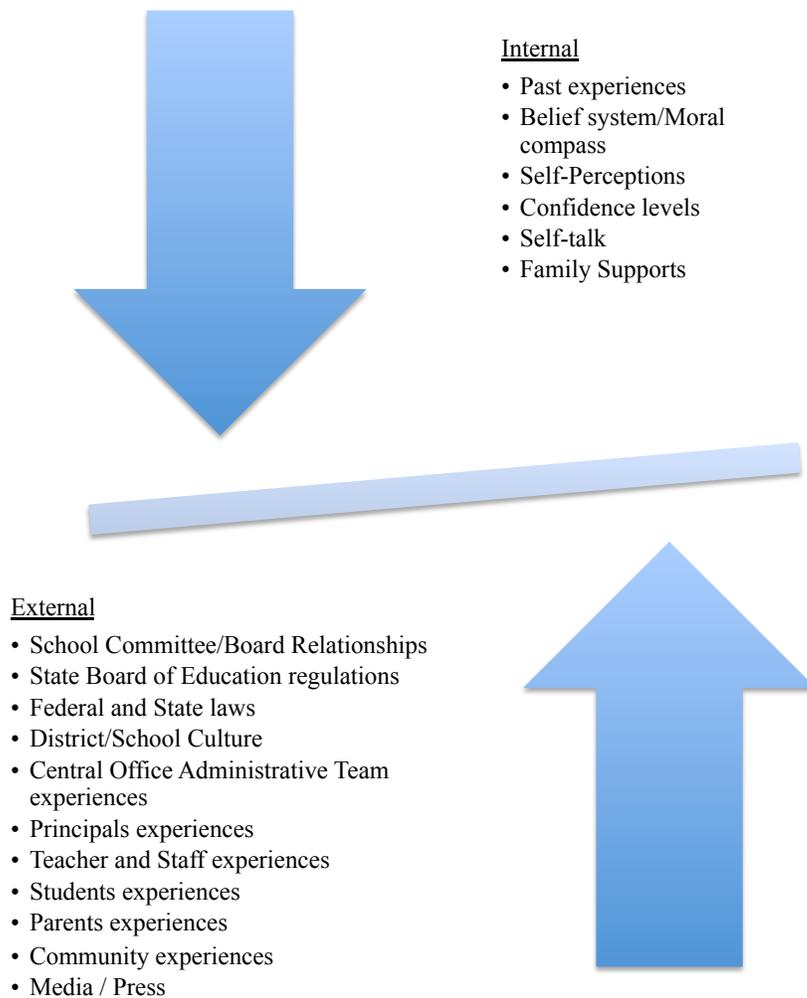
Pseudonym	Number of Districts as Superintendent	Years in one district as Superintendent	Type of District	Average Number of Students
Fionna	2	5+	Suburban	3,000

Annie	3	3.5	Suburban/Rural	2,500
Lisa	2	6	Urban/ Rural	1,500
Sarah	2	5	Suburban	2,500/1,500
Joanne	4	4	Rural/ Suburban	1,200/1,500/6,000
Margaret	3	7	Suburban	4,400/3,700/5,600
Ruth	3	2	Rural	2,400/1,200/1,400

Pseudonym	Position held before becoming a Superintendent	Predecessor Male or Female	Did you receive a higher or lower salary than your predecessor	Currently Working in the Field of Education
Fionna	Vice President College	Males	Higher	No
Annie	Assist. Superintendent	Male	Lower with less duties	Yes
Lisa	Executive Director of Curriculum & Instruction	Males	Higher	No
Sarah	Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Ed. And Special Services	1 Male/ 1 Female	Higher	No
Joanne	Principal	3 Males/ 1 Female	Higher	Yes
Margaret	Assistant Superintendent	Males	Higher	Yes
Ruth	Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning	2 Males / 1 Female	Lower	Yes

The individual narrative stories of seven retired female superintendents are presented through four broad thematic categories: Background, Self-Reflection, Gender, and Voice. Some of the internal and external factors influencing each participant’s story are noted in Figure 6: Developed Conceptual Framework, and are detailed in the individual stories and overall themes.

Figure 7: Developed Conceptual Framework



As a result of the data analysis, the internal influences that emerged from the participants' stories include: 1) past experiences, 2) a person's belief system or moral compass, 3) self-perceptions, 4) confidence levels, 5) self-talk, and 6) family supports. As a result of data analysis, the external influences that emerged from the participants' stories include: 1) relationships, including school committee and school board, 2) regulations, including those from the State Board of Education, federal and state laws, 3) district and school cultures, 4) experiences including central office administrative team, principal, teacher and staff, student, parent, and community, and 5) media and press.

In regard to internal influences, all seven participants discussed the importance of listening to their own internal voice, and linked following their moral compass to maintaining a high confidence level and positive self-image. All seven participants also noted how much they valued the support they received from their family, co-workers, and the communities for which they worked. In regard to external influences, five out of seven participants, Annie, Lisa, Joanne, Margaret, and Ruth, discussed stories regarding some kind of conflict with their school committee, school board, or community members. Four out of seven participants, Fionna, Margaret, Sarah, and Joanne, discussed stories related to the stressors associated with doing the "right thing" and firing ineffective staff. Three out of seven participants, Ruth, Sarah, and Fionna, detailed stories involving criminal or personnel investigations and dealing with the media, press, and state and federal compliance standards (see Table 4, A Broad Overview of the Types of Critical Moments Faced by Participants and Table 5, A Summary of Each Participant's Critical Moments on page 145.)

The detailed results of this study are presented in three ways; 1) the individual stories and themes associated with each participant's story, 2) the eleven overall themes that emerged from all the stories, and 3) the three overall categories that depict the way retired female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers. As previously noted, Saldaña (2016) claims collaboration must exist between the researcher and participants [in order for the individuals to feel safe enough to tell the details of their lived experiences](#). [In this study](#), all seven participants took an active [role](#) in verifying the accuracy of the final presentation of their story and the determination of the individual theme that categorized [her](#) story. This collaborative process helped to ensure the reliability, validity, trustworthiness, creditability, and transferability of each participant's data. The individual themes that emerged from each individual's story are noted below:

- Annie: Listening Theme
- Fiona: Self-Preservation Theme
- Joanne: Loneliness Theme
- Lisa: Empowerment and Courage Theme
- Margaret: Politically Astute Theme
- Ruth: Risk Taker Theme
- Sarah: Servant Leadership and Integrity Theme

The eleven themes that emerged from an analysis of the individual stories are:

- Theme 1-Positive Descriptions of Self
- Theme 2-Doing "What is Right" in the face of conflict/critical moments
- Theme 3-Advocating for self and others

- Theme 4-A belief others perceived them as strong leaders
- Theme 5-No Regrets with use of voice
- Theme 6-Endearing memories
- Theme 7-Confidence in voice developed with experience
- Theme 8-Ability to reflect on personal growth
- Theme 9-No planned career aspirations to become a superintendent
- Theme 10-A voice of integrity guides female superintendents
- Theme 11-Female superintendents face gender bias

After a thorough analysis of the eleven themes, three categories emerged that summarize how female superintendents used their voices during critical moments:

- To advocate for self and others;
- As courageous activists; and
- As reflective practitioners.

Individual Story Participant A - Voice of Annie: Listening Theme

Background. Annie dedicated 43 years to the field of education and in her retirement is currently working in the field of education in some capacity. The theme of listening emerged throughout Annie's story as she repeatedly detailed how she took great care to ensure others felt heard. Annie believes her ability to listen to others assisted her greatly with developing trusting relationships with others and because of this she always felt heard and respected as a female superintendent. She has a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study and a Master's degree in Educational Administration. Annie moved from being a bilingual teacher to a curriculum position and explains, "I wasn't really thinking about heading down that path, but it opened up

for me and I did take advantage of the situation.” She then moved into an elementary principal position in a district where she was the only certified principal in the district. From there she moved into an assistant superintendent role. Annie spent two years as an assistant superintendent before moving back into an elementary principal position where she stayed for another fifteen years.

Annie shares, the first time she became an assistant superintendent she was not ready for the work and she listened to herself and changed her position:

When I first stepped up to central office, I had been an elementary principal for six years. There was an opening in a neighboring school district for an assistant superintendent for curriculum, which I felt I had a good background in, so I applied and got that position. I think it was too early for me to do that. I did it for two years, but, it was too early and I ended up going back to being an elementary principal. The whole scope of the job is huge and I think I thought it would be able to just do professional development and work on curriculum, but the reality is I took over some of the school districts for the superintendent and I led everything from budget meetings to school building projects that we had going on. That was not what I was ready for and at that time, I didn't have enough experience. I really wanted to be more of an actor in teacher professional development and curriculum work, so there was no balance for me. I was trying to do it all, as we all do and needed a change.

Annie shares, “I was lucky enough to go back into an elementary principal position where I stayed as an elementary principal for fifteen more years in multiple districts.” Annie’s last principalship was at a lab school where a college oversaw the school and she comments on when

she knew it was time to move on again: “As much as the wheels of public education turned slowly, the wheels of academia turn even more slowly. And at that point I became disenchanted with what I was doing and was actually offered a job as a curriculum coordinator for another district and I took it.”

Annie worked for 10 years as a curriculum coordinator and then two years as an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction before becoming a superintendent. She became a superintendent at 62 when she and another female assistant superintendent became co-superintendents for a large district comprised of five school districts. Annie explains, she and her colleague did not want to apply for the superintendent position because the School Administrative Unit was so large (five school districts), so they offered to co-lead but their school board initially declined and hired a male superintendent who was later asked to leave because he couldn't do the job alone. Annie explains how the co-leadership role came to be:

The district had been led by a single superintendent with two assistant superintendents. I was assistant superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and the other woman that I worked with was assistant superintendent for Special Education. They hired someone to replace the superintendent, however, this person had very little experience and he was asked to leave at the end of October, beginning of November. Then they asked me, along with my co-assistant superintendent if we would take over and we agreed to do that only if we could split the districts. I had more elementary experience. She had more high school experience. I had the curriculum and professional development background. She had more of the special education background. We split

the districts up and it was a very even split as far as number of students that each of us we're responsible for and as far as the number of meetings per month.

Annie worked three and a half years as a co-superintendent and notes that district continues to use this model today. She explains the benefits:

We could run things by each other. Our offices were right next door to each other. We shared a secretary and office space. It was really an ideal situation. And to be very honest, I don't know how the superintendents who preceded us were able to manage all five of the districts. I think because we did split the districts that we were able to give more attention to each of them and also focus our efforts. The other superintendents before us were not able to accomplish what we did. The model continues, which I think speaks to the fact that it's a very workable model.

Annie explains she always “led by example,” and she “was so strong in the discipline and content (curriculum), it was just kind of a natural step” to move into the superintendent role the second time around. Annie explains how moving into the superintendent role was situational:

I would have been happy being a curriculum coordinator or assistant superintendent for curriculum and it was only because of the circumstances in the district that I was able to I step up to take the superintendency. I would have been very happy to just have been an assistant superintendent for curriculum until I was ready to retire, but at that point in my career I knew I had so much more experience and was really ready to do all facets of the superintendent's job.

Self-Reflection. Annie describes herself as “compassionate from a standpoint of

knowledge” and someone who knows how to listen to both sides and is able to do “what is best for students.” She believes, people saw her “as a good listener, yet able to make my own decisions after knowing all sides.” Annie shares her thoughts about her leadership style:

I would act after knowing all sides and all the extenuating circumstances. I spoke passionately about kids, education, and learning, and that was part of why people trusted me to make the right decisions. I acted for the best interest of students, and of course serving the school boards that I worked for. I was mentoring new principals, leading the curriculum efforts in the school districts, supporting all the legal requirements, and following the new trends in trends and policy.

Annie shares, “people really trusted that they would be recognized and heard” and she always acted as a good listener and mediator:

People saw me as being an advocate and being a listener, you know, even though I may not have agreed with them, they felt that they had been heard. For a lot of situations, I just diffused the situation. I would mediate between a parent and a teacher at a conference and even though I wouldn't necessarily side with the parent, in this situation because I knew more facts than they did about the situation, they at least felt heard. And we would always part amicably.

_____ Annie is most proud of the way she brought five school districts together for professional development and how she established new ways for staff to “honor each other as collaborators.”

She believes this work helped with developing a positive school climate:

People trusted me and trusted me with what I would do with what they gave me. And instead of having separate professional development days in eight different schools, I

brought everybody together at the high school, so that everybody was in one place and could share ideas and talk to each other. And you know, that to me was a high note in my superintendency.

Annie believes it was both her experiences as a principal and her in-depth knowledge as a curriculum leader that afforded her multiple opportunities to move into new positions. She remembers being asked to become an interim high school principal and the various roles she was able to fulfill over the span of her career:

I've had like some really good experiences that I hadn't planned on having. For example, I was a curriculum coordinator after moving from an elementary principal. I was an elementary principal and the high school principal was quite ill and because I was the only certified principal, I was asked if I could lead the high school as an interim principal until they found a more permanent solution. And I was really grateful for that experience because you know, I had worked in elementary schools, but had never had the high school experience and you know, it was a difficult high school in a low socioeconomic town.

When reflecting upon her various positions, Annie points out that the high school experience broadened her views and she describes what she learned:

Unlike elementary students, the high school students would come into the office to be disciplined and even though they were angry and not always respectful, they knew that they were the cause of why they were there. Unlike the elementary students who come in, all apologetic saying they'll never do it again and then you see them three weeks later for the same thing. It was nice to see that these high school kids who are going to be out in

the world soon, got it, and they understood they were the ones who were the cause of what they had done. That was encouraging. I was really thankful for that experience, and you know it was just something that happened and I was just open to it.

Gender. Annie does not analyze her ability to do her job based on gender rather she looks at her strengths as a “human being.” Annie believes she is “able to listen to the budget naysayers as well as the angry parents and have them feel like they were heard.” She believes her job was to always make sure others were heard. Annie does not see gender as something that impacted her skills:

I don’t know if it’s a male or female thing, but I certainly feel I was able to listen to all sides and I was praised for being able to summarize and acknowledge what other people said. Even though I didn’t agree with them, people saw that as, not necessarily a compromised position, but that they had been heard and I think that really helped to facilitate my job as superintendent.

Annie reflects upon how others saw her and shares a time when her school board chair became “irate” with her for doing her job and complying with a public records request from a town budget committee member. Even though the school board had all the information that she shared with the town budget committee member, the school board chair expected her to ignore the public records request because there was some tension between the school board and some members of the budget committee. Annie shares she tried to explain the laws to the school board chair and that it would have been illegal not to comply with the public records request, but he did not care. Annie vividly remembers how the school board chair became increasingly mad at her because the budget committee member wrote an editorial in the local paper with the information

he received from the public records request. The editorial was published during a school vacation and when Annie was not working because she was dealing with the death of a family member.

Annie explains what she told the school board chair when he reached her by phone:

I nicely told him that it was school vacation, that I had family issues to deal with, and I reminded him that he did have the information. I even offered and did write a rebuttal to the paper. I don't know that this was a critical moment that anybody else saw, but it did taint my dealings with school board after that. Incredibly.

Annie explains how the school board chair's anger regarding this situation did not let up and she shares, "somehow, I was the scapegoat in this situation, and my retirement eased that." She shares, "the school board chair had ruled in that district for probably 15 years, and his voice certainly superseded mine." Upon reflecting whether the school board chair would have treated her differently if she was a male, Annie explains:

He definitely would have calmed down sooner if I was a male and I don't think he would have held this against the prior superintendent who was a male for as long as he did with me. I became a persona non grata and I think the fact that I was female, gave him, I guess, a license to be critical of me.

Voice. When reflecting upon her voice, Annie says she never lost her voice or ability to speak up. Even though the situation with the school board chair had some weight on her decision to retire when she did, at no time did Annie not stand up for what she believed in or what she was legally responsible to do. However, Annie shares how her working conditions were impacted:

He did not stop me. I continued to speak my mind and speak for what I thought was the

benefit of the students or for what I legally had to do. I did, however, try to double check with the school board chair after this situation to make sure he knew that I was communicating. In a sense, that added an extra layer to what I was doing but I would say it didn't change my voice. It just made a few extra steps in communicating.

Annie claims her voice changed over time and she was "much more confident because of her experiences and knowing the laws and how school districts ran." She notes the different level of knowledge when comparing the responsibilities of a principal to a superintendent; "I knew budgets when I was an elementary principal, but it's just not the same thing to run a school district, you know, the scope is much bigger." Upon reflecting about how challenges helped her grow into the superintendent role, she shares the internal voice that guided her, "I was like, I can do this, I know I don't have too many years before I retire and this was my contribution to the profession." Annie connects her internal voice to her actions and staying true to her core values:

The internal voice that you know you have, you have to have integrity in a position like this (superintendent). You have to speak honestly, I am going to use the term politically correct just because it's in, but you know you have to be diplomatic about it. Even though you are speaking credibly, sometimes you have to soften it for people to be able to hear it. I always felt that I didn't compromise my beliefs.

Upon reflecting about her last year and a half in her superintendency, Annie remembers a couple critical moments involving bullying incidents, lawyers, and hearings. Although she would "try to listen to both sides and try to mediate," she "tried to be the voice of reason, even though sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't work." Annie details how she used her voice to guide the principal who wanted the district office to take over handling this difficult situation;

how she used her voice to keep the school board informed; how she used her voice to reassure students and parents who were involved; and how she used her voice during the hearings with lawyers. This bullying case went on for an extended period of time and involved two hearings to determine whether or not it was bullying. Annie remembers it was not until she shared some specific facts about the case at the second hearing that the case was dropped. She remembers the principal had originally shared the same facts at the first hearing but for some reason they were not heard. Looking back at this situation, Annie regrets she did not speak up sooner and upon reflection she wonders why her voice was heard when the principal's voice was not. Annie reflects on how she used her voice over her career:

I think that I did speak out and I was pretty passionate about what I believed in. I stood my ground. There was a line I held in the sand. Even though people knew that I heard what they had to say, I wouldn't compromise my own beliefs. I would always try to calm the situation down and try to have people listen to each other and be that voice of reason.

Individual Story Participant B - Voice of Fionna: Self-Preservation Theme

Background. Fionna dedicated 37 years to the field of education, including eight years as a superintendent in the same state. The self-preservation theme for Fionna's story became evident when she explicitly identified a connection between being successful at work and the pressures of being a single mother responsible for financially supporting her family. Fionna shares self-preservation was a way of life and she has always been acutely aware of the connection between maintaining her independence and job security. Fionna's story details how she was always careful to use her voice in ways that did not threaten her position as a female superintendent. She has Masters degrees in Counseling and English, and her Doctorate in

Educational Leadership. Fiona is not working in the field of education in her retirement years. Fiona became a superintendent at the age of 53 and describes her journey to the superintendent role as “non-traditional.” Fiona served for 14 years as a high school English teacher, five years as a high school counselor, two years as an assistant principal, four years as a high school principal, three years as vice president of a state technical college, and eight-plus years as superintendent in two different districts. Fiona comments on the evolution of her career aspirations:

I think most superintendents do not have extended experiences as classroom teachers before becoming superintendents, most have not been classroom practitioners for years. I had been in the classroom and counselor’s office for many years before conceptualizing school leadership as a goal. As I experienced a role other than teaching, my mind broadened to consider other work. In a sense, I was pulled kicking and screaming to take on other roles. When I was a high school English teacher my then-principal encouraged me to move into a counseling position. I loved teaching. When the principal offered me the flexibility of returning to teaching if counseling did not prove satisfying, I moved into a counseling role and loved it. After making one change, I was open to more and began to think of formal school leadership as a possibility. At about this time, three of us within the district were asked if we would be interested in participating in a doctoral program providing a full boat ride for academic coursework with a funded semester sabbatical.

How could anyone turn that down? Then, of course, the more I did, the more I knew I could do.

Self-Reflection. Fionna describes herself as a “hard worker,” someone with “courage” and a “keen sense of self-preservation.” As a single mother, Fionna has always had an acute sense of responsibility for those in her care and an understanding of the need for a back-up plan when thrown a curve. She believes these qualities are necessary when describing the school superintendent’s responsibilities. Fionna states, “Part of our job as superintendents is to watch out for those in our care, to anticipate the worst case scenario, and to always have a game plan.”

Fionna reflects on her past and credits her parents for her development of a strong work ethic:

I have always had a very keen sense of self preservation. And I don't think that's inhibited my ability to do my work. I think it's sort of enhanced it because it's always, do the right thing, do what is right, do what is defensible, do what the evidence supports. I had been taught by my parents and by my heritage that I was in a position of privilege by virtue of my upbringing and my education. My mother frequently posed a rhetorical question, when, as a kid I'd be more interested in getting credit than doing fine work. She'd ask, “Do you want to be right or do you want to be effective?” It's more important to get the job done and to move the district and the schools to excellence than to take credit for being right.

Fionna summarizes how her self-preservation skills assisted her throughout her career and protected her when working with her school committees:

I learned to be careful in developing a trusting, working partnership with the school committee. All superintendents are out there in different political arenas. The school committee members are political animals by virtue of the fact that they serve the local community as elected officials. For the most part they're very good people. Some have more courage and some have less courage. And it's important to keep that in mind. Because I've been a single parent responsible for the well-being and support of my children, I have always had a keen sense of self preservation. I learned to take care of myself very early. I hope that people have faith that I have the courage of my convictions and will speak to the truth even if doing so is at personal cost. I would not continue to work in a district where I was not making a positive impact or where the school committee was moving in a direction that I believed not prudent or helpful to students or productive for the greater community. I've been unbelievably fortunate. I have not found myself in a leadership position where my beliefs and actions were at odds with my immediate supervisor or the school committee.

Fionna reflects upon the critical moments in her career and notes how she learned to listen carefully and move through critical moments successfully. Fionna believes her strong sense of self-preservation, courage, and integrity kept her in grounded in a way that always afforded her the opportunity to view her experiences in a positive light. Fionna recalls:

I think there were numerous quiet, critical times when things could have gone wrong that don't jump out, times when I listened and learned quickly to listen long and listen well and not react by being defensive. In responding to those quiet critical moments, and there were many, many of those moments, what I learned is that it was more important for me to acknowledge what I heard than to respond immediately with my ideas. It is important to acknowledge the feelings of the person in front of you first before addressing the issue. Having learned that early in the game assisted in making my superintendencies more enjoyable and less fraught with conflict. Understanding that people want first to know they are heard put me in good stead when there were situations laden with emotions. People want to make sure that their voices are heard. And sometimes listening to complaints is very frustrating. Let's take as an example school building projects. Let's assume the community has had ten open meetings on a construction project. The community is scheduled to vote on the issue the following Tuesday. At the 11th and final meeting, someone stands up and says, this is the first time I've ever heard about this. Instead of responding defensively that there have been ten prior meetings, it is more effective to say, I understand we are not all in agreement. The building committee and community members have worked hard to lay out the strongest plan and to demonstrate in the prior ten meetings why this would be best for our students. Acknowledging disagreement and smoothing the waters while still giving evidence that numerous opportunities have existed to share information.

Fionna credits her ability to move into the principal and superintendent roles to her substantial academic preparation, solid written and verbal communications, strong work ethic, and honed political sensibilities. Fionna believes her many years as an English classroom teacher, work as a counselor in a suburban system, experiences as a high school principal in an urban district, and her understanding of systems she gained as a Vice President in higher education positioned her very well for the superintendent position. Fionna recognizes the importance of being supported and credits three different male mentors who challenged and guided her as she took on different roles with more leadership responsibilities: counselor, assistant principal, and principal. Fionna reflects on the differences between the high school principal and superintendent role, mentor advice, and gender bias:

Being a high school principal was unbelievably helpful for being a superintendent. I used to describe being a high school principal was like this (she demonstrates by clapping her hands with frequent soft hits) on a daily basis. And being a superintendent's is like this (she demonstrates by bringing her hands together with infrequent loud thuds). I'll be honest, I think the high school principalship is tougher to sustain over the years.

Fionna remembers the advice given to her by one of her mentors,

One of my mentors once said to me, "Make sure that your office has two doors." Only once did I have to worry about that. I remember I had a parent, a man, come at me across the table. I mean literally, he picked his body up and lunged. I stood up and said, "This meeting is over, I think we need to meet again when you are better able to speak of this

issue and I am better able to respond.” After that, I always had someone else in the room for potentially contentious meetings. This wonderful mentor also said, “Make decisions based on solid principles, pick your battles, admit errors, and make sure there are no surprises for your immediate supervisor or the school committee.” All of this was good advice.

[Fionna begins to ponder about how her gender impacted her experiences.](#)

I understand the work of the superintendent can be more difficult for women at times.

I've been very fortunate in that I've had people who were generous and supportive, both male and female. Maybe it would have been easier for me if I were a guy. Who knows?

Perhaps guys would have been in competition with me and they wouldn't have pushed me to pursue senior leadership because they would have seen me--were I a guy--as more of a threat.

Gender. Fionna reflects upon having the courage to reach for new positions and is grateful to the male mentors who supported her. Fionna remembers an experience during a job interview when gender was outwardly raised as an issue. Working as an assistant principal, she applied for a prominent high school principal position in a school serving over 3,000 students in a large metropolitan area. She was pleased the district invited her to interview and offered to pay flight and travel expenses. Learning there were nine candidates and she was the only female candidate did not dissuade her at all. Fionna speaks about the process with humor and pride when recalling the male superintendent's question: “Well, the real question is, can this little lady

do this big job?” Fionna remembers being taken aback in that moment and thinking, “Does this guy know that what he said could be fodder for a lawsuit” all the while maintaining her professional composure. Fionna came in second for the position, and received a call back from that district one year later asking if she would be interested in the principal position since their candidate of choice did not work out. Fionna thanked the district for their confidence in her but declined since she had just completed her first year as high school principal in another city. Fionna admits she did not spend a tremendous amount of conscious time reflecting on how her gender influenced her work as a superintendent, stating different treatment for women in positions of leadership is a cultural norm in our society.

When asked to reflect upon whether her gender impacted her experiences or use of her voice, she shares these stories:

I didn't come in and say since I am a female I would do things differently from a male. But I do think females can be easier targets. Some human beings in the larger culture hold women to a higher standard or a different standard than they hold men. I know that's slowly changing, but it's still there to some degree. Here is an example, I remember the story of a female superintendent coming back from a dinner on her own time who was stopped for driving under the influence, she was cited and fired. Well, technically she resigned after an emergency meeting of the school committee. I also remember the story of a male superintendent who was found passed out, dead drunk in his car during the school day, and he did not lose his job. For a guy to get drunk on the job is not smart but

is deal-able; for a woman to get drunk is immoral and terminal. Different places, I know, but women are often held to a higher moral standard.

_____ Fiona remembers a few more stories on how her gender impacted the way others saw her. One situation occurred even before she officially started her job as the new high school principal. A male department head visited her office prior to the start of school and said, “I don’t know if I can work for a female.” Fiona also recalls another experience with a male special education director from central office who she said, he “never called me by name or looked me in the eye, and referred to me when talking to others as--that woman.” Fiona comments, “I bet he wouldn’t have said something about--that man.”

Fiona recalls the time when she discovered this same male special education director in her office going through her desk one morning:

I found him one morning in my office. I usually arrived at work by about seven in the morning. One morning I got there earlier than usual, about twenty minutes of seven. He was behind my desk going through my materials. I walked in the office and said, “Good morning. Is there something I can help you with?” He got up, backed away, and walked out of the room without answering. He was a townie. I was very careful. He was on the central office administrative team and this situation made open communication difficult when we attended administrative meetings. But I told myself, I can do this! He was a townie, a former high school football player from this very small town, and he had lived there forever. I knew that he was going to be in town long after I would be, and I wasn’t

going to waste my energies in a match with him. I had too many other things to worry about. Pick your battles.

Voice. Fiona used a professional voice at work and says “at times it was authoritarian, warm, diplomatic, understanding, task-oriented” and the voice she used was dependent on the situation. Fiona clarified there was a distinct difference between her “work” voice and the voice she used with her family and friends. Her “work” voice often assumed an inquiry-based tone so she could build consensus and the trust necessary to move a district forward. Fiona reflects upon her belief that female superintendents are more directly and personally involved with resolving and communicating difficult situations than their male counterparts:

My knowledge in my practice has been, that my female superintendent colleagues have been more prone to being personally involved in the communication of difficult decisions and not assigning the communications of those decisions to other colleagues or subordinates. I think female superintendents probably own that responsibility differently and do that communication more directly. Women tend to invest more time, energy, effort, and thought into how things are going to be communicated out and then are more directly involved in the communication of difficult decisions.

Fiona reflects on how a person’s core values can be tested as a superintendent and how important it is for a superintendent to understand how her belief system impacts her responses to situations. Fiona shares that her core values have remained consistent over the years, but her responses to situations developed over time into flexible strategies as she matured:

A superintendent has to be careful. A superintendent has to know what she is doing, otherwise she can change as a human being, and changing to be politically expedient is not healthy for any person. I don't think a person can commit to actions that are against her grain, against her values and core beliefs and remain honest. If things had been against my core beliefs when I was thirty, I would have said I'm not going to change my personality to make a couple of intransigent people in the community happy and would have been pretty inflexible. At 50 or 60, I understood that I did not have to change my personality or my being. I knew that I could do what needed to be done remaining essentially who I was and still move from a set point to where the schools needed to be. I maintained my core being but certainly softened my corners over the decades and learned to chuckle about the needed diplomacy when I was with superintendents and especially female superintendents because we all know what we do.

Fionna believes you must know who you are as a superintendent. You must be authentic, have a sense of humor, and have the courage to use your voice. In looking back at her career, Fionna states, "The most important voice was the voice of principle and having a strong moral compass." In addition to acknowledging her family of origin for instilling in her a strong sense of purpose and social consciousness, Fionna also credits the female superintendents who came before her:

I know that I've benefited from the work of many women in other walks of life who have come before me. I was probably in the first big wave of female superintendents. I hope

our work benefited current superintendents. Clearly there have been women in other positions in the larger culture who have made it possible and easier to become a first female principal or superintendent. We sit on the shoulders of others. I consider myself a strong feminist and do believe that some women have been prevented from realizing their potential by virtue of their gender. I personally feel as if I've been very lucky because of a number of factors. One factor I acknowledge in having a good run is that I've always been prudent and knew that any one person is expendable. A superintendent is one poor decision away from getting fired. Another factor is that I've had very strong male mentors. My mentors could very well have been women, but women weren't plentiful in superintendent positions two or three decades ago. Yet another important factor is timing. I came to the superintendency just as doors were beginning to open in significant numbers for women.

Fionna comments on her ability to use her voice through the process of, “restructuring relationships” and “reframing the story.” She tells stories of coming into each one of her superintendent positions and making difficult personnel decisions that involved the reduction of a beloved principal, reassignment of numerous central office administrators, and adjusting the power dynamic with teachers’ unions. Fionna recognizes “the toughest issues are the human issues, not the dollars and cents issues but the issues involving a judgment about a human being made as a consequence of that person’s behavior or the group’s behavior.” Fionna shares, “relationships are the first things to be cultivated in any superintendency,” and she notes relationships automatically become different when you become the superintendent. She

remembers, “The quality of relationships shifted a bit (when I became a superintendent), I think I had very good relationships with teachers, but not personal friendships, not deep personal friendships.” Fiona says, although “luck” played a role when she became the first female principal or the first female superintendent, it was her skills with building relationships, reading emotions, and adjusting her responses that helped her perform her job responsibilities successfully:

It has dawned on me recently that my whole approach to the superintendency as a woman may have been somewhat different from that of some men. I knew I would be perceived differently by some people and held to a different standard since I was the first female high school principal in the district or the first female superintendent of schools. One of the things I learned very clearly was that emotion trumps logic in any fight everyday.

Evidence and data provide the answers to problems, but in a public forum, pay plenty of attention to the emotional pitch and acknowledge it. So, by all means I invested 40 hours preparing for town meeting, but I had already invested hundreds of hours in building relationships and I always acknowledged tough decisions were made to benefit students and their learning. I think men also build relationships, but my approach was to invest tons of time and effort into building relationships and partnerships and connections.

Fionna believes listening to others and responding carefully helped her with building trust in the communities she worked in. She remembers always opening up conversations with “a statement of gratitude” to assist with getting people to hear her message. Fionna details how she thinks others saw her in her role as superintendent:

People saw me out working all the time and they might have said, even if I don't agree with her, she's working all the time. She's at every town meeting that I can see. She's at every celebration. She goes to funerals. She always listens to me. She always seems prepared. I would never, I would never lead with evidence. I would always lead with a statement of gratitude and a restatement of the challenges that I knew everybody in the community was facing. The message was from the heart and head, and it was always the truth.

Individual Story Participant C - Voice of Joanne: Loneliness Theme

Background. Joanne dedicated 44 years to the field of education, including 14 years as a school superintendent for two large districts comprised of several districts and two single districts, in various states and regions. The longest timespan she was a superintendent in one district was four years. In her retirement, Joanne continues to work in the field of education in some capacity and she continues to pay close attention to her local school committee meetings. The theme of loneliness emerged as Joanne told her story and repeatedly reflected upon the feelings of loneliness and isolation she felt as a female superintendent. Joanne explicitly noted the challenges she faced when she dealt with high profile personnel situations and was unable to respond to the public because she had an obligation to keep information confidential. Joanne's story highlights the limited support system she had as a female superintendent and the importance of having a strong family support system outside of work. Joanne shares how the

feelings of loneliness and isolation impacted the way she was able to use her voice as a female superintendent.

Joanne earned her Masters in Curriculum and Leadership and Doctorate in Educational Leadership. She became a superintendent at 51, after being an elementary and high school principal. Joanne spent 21 years as an elementary and high school teacher, five years as an elementary principal, and three years as high school principal. Joanne remembers she was a high school principal and, “my superintendent at the time, said, I really think you need to move up to take on more challenges and he told me about a superintendent opening in a neighboring district.” Joanne recalls, “he truly pushed me to apply and I thought, it wouldn’t hurt to apply and interview to see what it was all about.” Joanne recalls the pressure she felt when she was given the opportunity to take on the superintendent role:

Then, I had to make the decision whether to take it or not, but it was exciting, it was challenging, and I thought at the time, well maybe instead of just affecting my own little school, I could be a voice for the children for an entire district, which was a huge challenge and one that I was willing to embrace.

Joanne calls herself “a very linear superintendent” and someone whose “focus is truly on the best education possible for children.” Joanne expresses her concern that politics can interfere with a district’s or school’s ability to take the necessary action steps for improvement and can often promote a “status quo” culture:

Politics frustrate me. I think that when we look at having everyone feel good and no one is accepting responsibility for their actions, be it parents, students, teachers, administrators, it's just a big cog in the wheel and we don't do our kids service. When people say education is important, it truly should be important that should be the focus, not the extraneous garbage noise that comes with that.

Self-Reflection. Joanne had very different experience in each of the districts in which she worked. She fondly recalls her first district where many of the parents did not speak English or make it past the eighth grade. She respected the parents in this district because even though they faced significant challenges, “these folks had pride in themselves and in their children and were willing to put in hours upon hours of work to do what’s right for their kids.” Joanne remembers the strong sense of trust that existed in this district:

It was my first year and the teachers’ contract was up and it was time for negotiations.

When I asked the head of the union, what days were good for negotiations, he just looked at me and he says, “You know, I think that you would do just as good as we would, so can you just go to talk to the board and get what you think is fair.” This sort of told the story of their culture. We were in it together. If the board didn’t feel there was money, there was no money and they accepted that. It was just very, very different. And I think for my first superintendency it was really sweet because I could just focus on education. I didn’t have to worry about that kind of political component. That never happened again. Yeah, it was really nice.

Joanne recalls during these four years of her first superintendency she was “more hesitant, and asked more questions.” She reflects upon how she saw herself and how others saw her in this community:

I was more cognizant of the fact that I needed not just employees, but needed friends, colleagues, and that made a difference as it was a very small district. If somebody was away we couldn't get a substitute, I substituted. I drove a bus if I needed to drive a bus, took kids to sporting events. So there was a more cohesive unit and feeling of unity.

Folks didn't see me as the boss.

Joanne believes the language barrier with parents in her first district assisted with getting to the bottom of issues more quickly:

I found the language barrier to be interesting because I always had an interpreter with me and I would say 99% of my teachers were fluent in both English and Spanish. When the parents had to explain to an interpreter what they wanted from me, they chose their words more carefully. So I didn't get a lot of the emotional anger and angst that I got with speaking with English speaking parents. Parents were very aware that they needed to be specific with what they wanted from me with the interpreter. They chose just only the words that were needed and when I spoke back through the interpreter, I would do the same thing. I think getting rid of all that emotion helped us solve problems a lot easier. The language barrier helped us reach solutions faster and with less animosity than I've noticed when I'm dealing with English speaking people because they don't have to coach their language.

Upon reflecting on her role as a superintendent in multiple districts in several states and regions, Joanne describes the loneliness she felt as the superintendent:

I think the hardest part of a superintendency is who do you call? It's not like when I was a teacher I could go and talk to my peers or even my union representative. When you are in a smaller district and you do not have an assistant superintendent, you truly are alone. I didn't feel I could go to the board because their role was the big things, and they would have thought, it's your job. When you're new at it, you call somebody else and they say, "Oh God, they hired her, and she's not competent," so I really felt alone.

Joanne adds, the isolation as a superintendent became compounded when she decided to become a turnaround superintendent and she realized teachers were not always willing to commit to change. She reflects upon her responses to the pressures of leading a turnaround district:

I guess my choosing to be turnaround superintendent, I had to stop and think, Is this really what I want to do? Do I have the energy and the emotional stability to handle it? It was really rough. I was really alone. The first time I had push back from the teachers, I was really stunned. I was so surprised that educators didn't put children first. We had a change in curriculum and change in the implementation, I offered professional development and said we could do it during the day, we could do it on Saturdays and I would pay them. I would say 50% of my teachers were willing to do that, but 50% were not. They felt they had the experience to teach and didn't need anything new. Even though the data showed the kids weren't performing, they blamed the kids. I was shocked they were not willing to look inside. I think I probably sat in my office and cried a little because I wasn't sure what to do.

During this time period, Joanne remembers she had to “terminate some teachers and put many others on notice” because of poor job performance. Although her board supported her and the teachers did not go to the union because they knew she “had enough data to say they weren’t doing their job,” she recalls feeling completely alone. Looking back on this experience, she notes she acted quickly because of the level of urgency presented within this turnaround district. In retrospect she wished she had taken the time “to be patient and understanding” with the teachers who had different perceptions than she did:

In hindsight, I probably would have not been in such a rush to do things immediately. I would have taken maybe a year or two and brought more folks along in hopes that those stragglers would have voluntarily retired because it did create a bit of a riff in the school and community when some of the folks were fired, because they were well liked. It took me a while, I’d say two to three years before I won the majority back. I could have handled that differently.

Joanne believes she learned a lot from this experience and as she grew as a superintendent she noticed a change in her approach; “As soon as I got pushback, I was like, how do I correct this?” After experiencing the fallout from firing a number of staff, Joanne learned it “takes a long time to rebuild trust, because people are really distrustful and afraid.” Joanne reflects upon her experience as leadership dilemma; “You have to make change without the fear, and that’s the tough part, making change without fear.”

Gender. Joanne describes herself as “tough” and believes others eventually saw her as “tough.” Joanne shares how some people were surprised by her ability to be “direct” and

“strong” because they assumed her leadership characteristics would be “softer” simply because she was a female:

I think being a female impacted me sometimes. When folks would come in either board members or teachers, they would perceive a more motherly approach and were taken aback at my cut and dried approach. I would say, you know, this is what our policy says, this is what our rule is, and no I don't have any wiggle room here. And then they didn't push it anymore. They accepted it. I knew what the law was, I knew what the policy was, and I had a vision for the schools. Nobody pushed.

Joanne considers herself to be a very direct communicator and she believes her gender assisted her when she was trying to get the town to vote on an extensive building project. She remembers working with a variety of engineers and construction workers and asking tons of questions so she could produce a comprehensive presentation for the town and school board. She recalls having to be very direct with the contractors to get the type of information she need to breakdown of the details and costs of the construction project, so she could then put it into layman's terms for the community to understand. Joanne comments on how her gender assisted her during this experience:

The more questions I asked, the more the contractors tried to explain it to me, and the more I would put that information into charts. They (the contractors) would look at my charts and say, “We can produce more extensive charts,” and I said, ‘No, I need to understand it and the common person on the street needs to understand it.’ That was a wake-up call for them, so they worked harder at answering all my questions. I wasn't afraid to say, I don't understand this. Rather than just letting the experts talk about it and

sit there and let it go in one ear and out the other, I broke down the information for everyone to understand. Maybe as a female superintendent, it was easier for me because people tend to think men should understand construction. I don't think it's a gender thing, but I think gender bias is really out there. They had no problems with me breaking things into simpler terms, which helped everyone understand it, but they might not have treated a male the same way.

Voice. Joanne believes others saw her as “someone who really puts their money where their mouth was because I would go to the board and I would talk to the board.” Joanne infers she never quieted her voice or relinquished her position to the school board. She credits the success of getting a community to approve a building project to the ways in which she used her voice:

My voice was heard only because I was prepared. I recognized that the money was tight, but I also recognized that if I could convince the folks they weren't going to pay anymore than necessary and they were going to get a benefit out of it, that everyone could win.

Joanne details how some of her actions over time assisted with showing the school board they desperately needed to consider a building project. She shares how classrooms were so cold that it impacted the learning environment for students, and students and teachers wore jackets all day. Joanne decided to host the school board meetings in different classrooms:

I would actually walk them down to the classroom and hold the board meeting in the classrooms that were freezing cold so they could experience it, because telling someone isn't as good as showing them. The teachers were like, “What do you mean you want to have a board meeting in my classroom?” I would tell them they (school board) needed to

experience what you experience every day. And they would clean up their classrooms and go, 'Whoa!' It was impactful to the board, too, because they could say they were freezing cold only after a two hour meeting and admit there was no heat.

When looking back on her voice in the turnaround district, Joanne admits, "I was pretty harsh and wasn't forgiving, I wanted the change, and wanted it now." Joanne fired several teachers and this caused a riff in the schools and community. She remembers hearing her internal voice and feeling compelled to immediately create educational changes that benefitted students:

In my head, I was saying these children deserve more. I didn't want them to wait three years to get educated. I want it now. Not realizing that I was going to lose time because I expecting too much, too fast, was really tough. I gave up more than I got with those changes. It could have gone smoother if I had just taken a step back and maybe looked at the bottom 20% of teachers instead of the bottom 50%.

Joanne reflects upon the changes of her voice over her career. In the turnaround district she demanded change, in her following district she was "much more relaxed and would go and talk to the principals and teachers and ask them what they needed." Joanne admits:

I think in both positions, they saw me as very tough. I'm very organized, very definite. In the district following the turnaround district they saw me as approachable and I don't think they would have used that term in the turnaround district. I remember in this district, one of my nurses told me she would stop and ask herself, "Do I really want the truth?" and if she did then she would come to see me. I know people wouldn't have come to ask for help in the turnaround district. They just wouldn't have done that.

Joanne points out how a district's climate and culture impacts a superintendent's ability to use her voice and "sometimes, no matter what you do, things are simply out of your control." Joanne details a critical moment when she realized doing the right thing would ultimately force her to leave her job:

It was later on in my career, and I had been a superintendent for 10 or 11 years, and I had to fire the football coach. Football was huge in this town. I told the board first, had done everything right, and they were fully supportive. I had all the evidence in the world that this person needed to be fired, but there was a huge division in the town. Although people recognized there was a problem, they didn't want it brought to the surface. I think it was 18 months after this, I retired from the district, which was the best thing I could have done because I wasn't there to remind them that they had idolized this person who didn't deserve it. That was a hard truth for them to swallow.

Joanne remembers feeling the loneliness that she felt in the turnaround district, "It was really emotional, even though I had been a superintendent for over ten years, I did not have someone to go to." Joanne recalls, "I knew that it was the right thing to do, but I was also really hesitant and a little scared because I knew there was going to be push back." Joanne did her best to handle his personnel matter in a professional manner and worked diligently to minimize the noise in the community:

My big concern was that it (the noise) was targeted at me and not my principals or my teachers or the kids. I didn't want any of the evidence that I had collected to be public because they had to live in that town and I didn't, so I was in a protective mode knowing that I was probably not going to survive the war, but it still had to be done.

Joanne admits, “I don’t think anybody realized what an emotional ride it was for me, because they all saw me as tough, and a person willing to do the right thing.” Even though the school board supported the decision to fire the coach, they did not “realize how hard this was” or how it impacted her personally and emotionally:

They (school board) had no clue and I really tried hard for them not to see that side of me. My husband saw that side of course, because I would come home with it, and although you try to leave it at the door, you’re quiet, you’re reflective, you don’t talk as much and you wonder about things. The School Resource Officer was probably the one that knew the most and he would come down a couple time a week to make sure I was okay and it got to the point that he would actually meet me at the door when I was leaving at night to make sure that there was no retaliation by the kids because the football players were upset that their coach was gone. It was not just emotional, it was a physical safety issue.

Joanne reflects upon how this particular critical moment changed the way in which she typically used her voice. She went from being an outspoken and direct leader to someone who was more subdued. She remembers her thought process regarding the use of her voice and the self-talk she used during this experience:

I think it was like, I’m just going to be quiet, if it’s not truly important, I am not going to speak, it’s just not worth it. I was not going to take on any more issues. I put everything else into such a low plane. Things that would have been important before, fell on the back burner. Not educational things for the kids, those went ahead, but the passion wasn’t there anymore and I retired after that. I just didn’t have the energy anymore. I was really

jaded after that, when a town or even a majority of folks in a town could not see what we saw in this person, that the drinking and abuse could be overlooked, I said, ‘why am I fighting so hard?’ I will fight to death for a town that fights for their kids. Even two of the board members resigned because of the harassment, and they said, “We can’t do this anymore, the harassing phone calls, and snubs on the street.”

Joanne shares she always used her voice to do the right things for the districts for which she worked and she comments that today’s superintendents appear to be letting school board members take their voice away:

I watch our board meeting locally and I see the superintendent bows to the board. The board is not the educational leader in the district, the superintendent is. The superintendent should say, ‘Excuse me, but you’re wrong, this is what we need and explain why.’ The board shouldn’t be taking your power away. I see that over and over and over.

Joanne remembers a school board member who was on the board for over 18 years telling her, “We never had a superintendent who told us what our role was and explained how we could support the district.” Joanne was told that before she got there, “the board would come to the meetings and rubber stamp things.” Joanne shares she is still good friends with this school board member and she happened to be one of the school board members who resigned because of the harassment caused by the firing of the football coach. Joanne reflects upon her past and details the questions guided her use of voice throughout her career:

Is it right? Is it right for kids? Is it the right time? Is it the right time for teachers? Is it right for the community? And is it the right thing to do right now? A big takeaway for me

is to call my attorney earlier rather than later. They are the ones who could talk me down or tell me what else I needed. I never had one tell me what I was trying to do was incorrect, but they did tell me what I needed to be successful legally. In the beginning I didn't do that enough because I was worried about the money, but then I realized that's what they are there for.

Individual Story Participant D - Voice of Lisa: Empowerment and Courage Theme

Background. Lisa dedicated 32 years to the field of education, including nine years as a school superintendent for two different districts in the same state. Lisa became a superintendent at the age of 51, after 33 years in a variety of educational roles (teacher, assistant principal, and principal). Before moving into the superintendent role, Lisa was a Director of Curriculum and Instruction for a suburban district. Lisa was prompted to move into the superintendent role because she had set a goal of becoming a superintendent to be a role model for girls and practice leadership with the "30,000 foot view." Lisa was the first-ever female superintendent in her first superintendent position for a small rural conservative town where she worked for six years. Coincidentally, she was the second-ever female superintendent in her next position for a large urban district where she worked for three years. Lisa smiles when she says, "the female superintendent prior to me was hired the year I was born, 50 years ago." The theme of empowerment emerged through Lisa's story as she detailed the challenges she faced as the first female superintendent in districts that were accustomed to having male leaders. Lisa described her actions and the courage she had to display when advocating for equitable opportunities for all students. Lisa shares she used her voice to advocate for equitable opportunities and the rights and

safety of all students. Lisa has her Master's and Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and is currently not working in education and enjoying her retirement years.

Self-Reflection. Lisa describes herself as a female superintendent who is, “curious, innovative, humble, very caring, and a relationship builder.” Lisa notes others saw her as “very professional, tactful, and someone who resolved things as you are supposed to do as the superintendent.” Although Lisa comments, “it felt like it was never enough” given the multiple challenges every superintendent faces, she does recognize the good work she accomplished over her career:

One of the things that you do in retirement is think about all the things that didn't go well. But the nice things about reviewing the pictures are, I always felt I was kid centered and these pictures are all about being kid centered. Being out in classrooms and enjoying conversations and building relationships and seeing really good teaching going on and people who really cared deeply for the kids. I think all superintendents should be required to look back at their pictures because it was very uplifting.

Lisa makes the connection of how things come full circle; she shares how building relationships with teachers and creating programs can take a life of their own and how they blossom long after people leave districts. Lisa was recently humbled to be invited to participate in the making of a video for the 20-year anniversary of a school she opened as principal. Lisa shares, “many things that we put in place twenty years ago are still in there,” and “ironically the principal who called was my son's teacher and she actually influenced him to become a teacher and now he is a principal.”

Lisa describes herself as courageous and always willing to do what is best for students. She makes the connection between spending time in schools to her ability to then educate others on the good work of teachers and students:

You are in a fishbowl all the time, people are watching who you are talking to, what you are doing. And I thought it was really important to be in classrooms and schools. Well, plus I loved it. I mean who wouldn't want to be there, it's the best part of the job. Just being there (in schools) I used my voice to be supportive and then was able to easily express all the positive things kids are able to achieve.

_____ Lisa shares “being an administrator means that you have to be a teacher at heart, so I always tried to teach and coach people, but when I had to be I could be tough.” Lisa references Jim Collin’s *Level Five Leadership* and says:

When you read about leadership, it's really about courage. I have always been big on *Level Five Leadership*, which says, that you're not afraid to fire your brother. And even though, that kind of speaks to personnel in a broader sense, it speaks to you. You can't be afraid to speak up. You just try to do it in, in a professional, tactful way. The superintendent role is kind of about social justice and it's about doing the right thing.

Upon reflecting on various pressures associated with the superintendent’s job, Lisa comments on the importance of support systems for superintendents. Lisa shares her husband would watch all her School Board meetings on cable television and wait up for her after long executive sessions. She said, his support was invaluable and smiles when sharing he would often greet her after a long night by saying, “Honey, did you quit yet?”

Gender. Lisa was the first-ever female superintendent; her first superintendent position for a small rural district and the second female superintendent in fifty-years in her second superintendent position for a large urban district. She shares:

I was the first woman superintendent ever. And at first people were concerned, they were like, I don't know if I could work with a female. Oh yeah, (laughter). I had a couple of principals tell [sic] me that people would approach them and say, "Well, how is it working for a female?" Because the opposite had always been all males, there were a lot of assumptions that it was just going to be different somehow. Maybe they thought I was going to be rough and tough.

When recalling the critical moment about the controversy with purchasing multi-cultural books, Lisa said:

Having a female voice probably made the situation more difficult. I was the second woman in the history of the district as superintendent and the first woman had been superintendent the year I was born. There was no (institutional) memory, no board memory of working with a female. There was definitely disrespect, and I think that sometimes they felt awkward. They had a hard time with a woman who they saw as intelligent, who they knew they couldn't push around. A couple of them when I was hired thought they could just tell me what to do and I would just do it. These men especially had a difficult time. When I say, I was like a speck in the ocean, it was almost like no matter what I said it wasn't going to help. And that was very disheartening almost to the point where I wondered if I should say something at all because I knew it was going to make it worse. However, kids need a voice and I had to be that voice at that time.

Lisa shares that she was always professional in her communications and actions and now wonders if things would have been different if she lost her cool once in a while. She comments, as a woman you have to pay particular attention to how you are being perceived:

Because when you're a woman people interpret you losing your cool differently than when a man loses his cool. When men speak up or use a strong voice, or get angry, its, they're strong and with a woman, it would be, she is the "B"-word.

Voice. Lisa reflects about her voice and having the courage to speak up. She used her newsletter to educate, "especially the School Board who were not as supportive as I had hoped they would be." She believes superintendents have an obligation "to express to kids they can do anything" and they need to "be willing to have the courage to say what needs to be said on behalf of the students." Lisa shares a critical moment on how she used her voice after the election of a few new School Board members shifted her board's focus from being "caring" to "micromanaging:"

A couple of new school board members came on board who were very conservative, very TRUMP-like. It was a very large district where there were a lot of refugees, children of color, children from poverty. And the new board members had a mindset that, children who didn't speak English didn't really belong in our schools. Unfortunately, one of these folks was the chair. We invited a couple of teachers (to a School Committee Curriculum and Instruction meeting) who were doing this reading program, which was more than a program, it offered a new way to teach refugees, immigrants, those who didn't speak English, and tried to help them adjust to the culture. These teachers were very passionate and started to take out the books they were using to help children. The books were stories

of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King. And suddenly the School committee members became enraged, saying, “Why are we spending money on this and where are the books about Abraham Lincoln. We don't want these kinds of books in our school.” I was, I was so shocked.

_____ Lisa remembers explaining to the School Board, “books are important parts of children’s lives” and “we need to have print that reflects students’ experiences and that all students should be able to see themselves in books.” Lisa recalls:

It was like I was talking to somebody from Mars and I was sitting next to the Assistant Superintendent and he could see I was, I was so angry. I was just incensed. I mean, how can you be a school board member sitting on the board for children and start micromanaging to the point where you're going to say which books can be in front of children. So, I actually got up, I excused myself, I got up and I went into the hallway and my assistant superintendent came along with me and kind of talked me down. That was a critical moment because I realized that I could speak up. I could speak up and try to be very “teaching” to a board that shifted from one of being very open and caring to a board that micromanaged. I simply had to speak up because I could not do this to this population of children that we were working with.

When asked how she would describe herself looking back at this critical moment, Lisa responds, “I felt like I was a speck in the big ocean.”

There is so much that goes on as a superintendent, whether it be, trying to get a new roof on a school, to dealing with a student who has these challenges and trying to figure what

to do for them, but I think I was really shocked that this racial bias was sitting smack dab in front of me and I didn't feel prepared for it.

Lisa recalls how one particular board member would not drop the issue and made it his public mission to criticize the purchase of the culturally diverse books by reading a book everyday on his radio show with a sarcastic voice. Lisa shares others saw her as “professional and tactful” and “calm and cool” during this time and notes his radio show eventually went out of business because people stopped buying advertisements due to his inappropriate comments.

When Lisa shares her photographs, one particular picture stood out; it was a picture where you could barely see Lisa who was surrounded by a mound of children’s books. Pictures tell a thousand stories, and this picture tells the story of Lisa’s retirement and her parting message to the board members who were against purchasing multi-cultural books for children. Lisa did not want a retirement party, and instead she asked people to donate a children’s book to her so she could put a message in it and donate it back to the schools. Lisa expected a couple dozen books, and upon her surprise hundreds of books were given to her and upon her delight, people purposefully gave her books that represented many different cultures. Lisa smiles with pride upon her retirement, remembering her parting gift of hundreds of books that provided her students the ability to see themselves in their literature, and remembering that these hundreds of multi-cultural books did not need the approval from her micromanaging School Board because they were a donation!

Lisa provides another example of using her voice in a collaborative fashion to convince her School Board on purchasing computers in a poverty stricken district. She recalls a “really positive moment when we went to the School Board to start a one to one computer lap program

for kids at the high school and they approved it and to this day all freshman who enter high school get their own laptop and it stays with them.” She said, “It was all about changing how students could access information” and notes:

I used my voice in a very collaborative way because it wasn't just about me. It couldn't just be my voice. It had to be very collaborative with the high school principal, the district office, because you're trying to convince somebody who's having to meet a budget every year that another addition to a quite hefty budget is going to be a beneficial thing.

Lisa shares the most critical moment in her career was when a student shot himself in the cafeteria in one of her schools. She details how she used her voice to support others, and believes others saw her as a “rock” and someone who was “focusing on everybody's well-being” during this emergency.

I got a call that there had been a shooting in one of the schools and the newspapers and media were calling the office. There wasn't much known. We only knew it occurred because the media was calling. We discovered a young boy had brought a weapon to school. It was one that could come apart. He had taken it apart and put it in his bag and put it in this locker. And when he went to lunch, he went to his locker and snapped it back into place, put it together and sat down at a table with a bunch of kids. It was a boyfriend, girlfriend kind of thing. A principal was standing right behind him and in front of seventy kids he shot himself. The principal saved his life. He survived it.

The first thing we did that day was all of the team came together and we sat in the room and we planned every single thing out. We were always a good team, but we really came

together. Community came together, School Board, everybody. Everyone was on the same page and the district was different after that, I mean, everybody had everyone's back.

I had to use my voice to calm people down and so it was a lot of one-on-one. Also with the media, I had to keep them informed. I had to use my voice to basically talk to the community and talk to other superintendents. I even spoke at the commissioner's meeting, I explained what had happened and talked about what we learned. One of the major things we learned is if you have a first aid kid at school, it's not going to cut it.

Individual Story Participant E - Voice of Margaret: Politically Astute Theme

Background. Margaret dedicated 42 years to the field of education, including 12 years as a school superintendent for three different suburban districts in the same state. The theme of being politically astute emerged as Margaret told her story and highlighted her own awareness that her voice was always interpreted in relationship to the political climate that existed in the communities she worked for. Margaret's story depicts a politically astute female leader who learned how to strategically use her voice in ways that would positively impact educational change at the local and state level. The longest timespan Margaret was a superintendent in one district was seven years. Margaret currently works in the field of education in her retirement. She became an assistant superintendent at the age of 44 after being a high school principal for eight years. Margaret spent five years as an assistant superintendent before the opportunity presented for her to become the interim superintendent at age 50. Margaret became the interim superintendent for one year when the district's superintendent left for another job. When the

headhunter asked her why she did not apply for the permanent superintendent position she shared:

I am not sure if they really wanted me to be the superintendent. They would have just appointed me superintendent. So, that means they really don't want me to be the superintendent. I didn't want to be here after someone else got it.

Margaret describes her year as interim superintendent as “a very productive year” and notes “people didn't see any gaps because I worked very closely with everybody.” She also shares there were “trying times,” such as managing a highly publicized teachers' strike and the hearings associated with the previous superintendent's firing of a well-liked high school principal. Margaret did not apply for a permanent position as superintendent and in retrospect regrets that decision because the person they hired was “the worst superintendent in the world” and did not last. At the time she did not know this male superintendent would eventually be asked to leave; Margaret applied and was appointed as a superintendent for another district.

Margaret obtained her Masters of Arts in Teaching and her Doctorate in Language & Literature. She started her career in education as a junior high school teacher and moved into administration because the opportunities presented themselves. She reflects upon the various roles she had in her career:

I would do it all over again. I would do what I did. When I was an assistant high school principal, it was clear that I was going to be a high school principal, and one of the other principals said to me, “Oh, it's very good that you've done all of this because it's important to sit in all the chairs of other people.” Women have said that women of my generation were told that they needed to sit in all the chairs. So I did, I was a teacher, I

was a department head, I was an assistant high school principal, I was high school principal, I was an assistant superintendent, and a superintendent along with having the experience as faculty and administration in both a private and public university. I sat in all the chairs. Even though I would say that advice is not necessary, it was certainly useful because sitting in all the chairs gave me credibility and the experience to know what the aspects of the jobs are and the authority to say, I know what you're talking about, I've been there.

Self-Reflection. Margaret reports she has “a lot of retroactive confidence that I did a good job” in the curriculum and leadership areas of the school district, yet recognizes there are “times when politics get in the way as it often does with things like school committees.” Margaret says, “I saw myself in the superintendent’s role as taking the district from where it was to a better place.” Margaret describes herself as “quite straightforward” and someone who was “careful not to in anyway denigrate the school committee or school district.” She shares: “My first concern was not to put the school district on trial. So, the important point was to protect the school district, not create any kind of problem and also protect the school committee.”

Margaret credits her ability to be politically savvy to her educational background and family history. She was strongly influenced by her father’s escape from Poland and his ability to stand up for what he believed in. She reflects upon her family history:

I am an activist. I’m my father’s daughter. He escaped from Poland before the beginning of the Nazi march. He and my mother got married, went to Portugal, and my father owned a factory that manufactured knitted outerwear, such as sweaters. They were very lucky and as a result, my brother and I were very lucky. My father told me that he was

approached once by the Schutzstaffel to knit those khaki colored sweaters that the Schutzstaffel wore. My father said he was able to say no because he lived in Lisbon not Warsaw. That's kind of a negative voice story, but it's the same message, "if you see something, do something."

Margaret describes herself as "impatient," "active," and "well-spoken." [She voiced.](#) I am basically impatient and so it was a real challenge to be patient. I speak well in public. I'm a former English teacher. I write well. I can think very quickly on my feet. So, I never had a problem being put on the spot.

[Margaret saw her role as a "public servant" and shares.](#)

I was very active in the Superintendent's Association and did a lot of educating at the State House carefully, because when you are a public servant you can't lobby or even advocate. I did a lot of educating of legislators and to this day I know a number of them by first name. I think I had some influence on the Commissioner of Education to use email for newsletters and bulletins.

Margaret was a superintendent in three different suburban districts and speaks about her ability to work in communities where there were many well-educated and outspoken constituents who were always willing to state their opinions. She refers to one community, as the "I know better than you community," and she shares, "my husband used to laugh at me in the morning and ask, dear, who is going to advise you at tonight's meeting?" When asked how others saw her in her role, Margaret shares:

I think a lot of people in the community, if they didn't like me, saw me as a pushy Jewish woman, which is kind of ironic because I'm not a practicing Jew, but I am Jewish. By

and large, most 90%, of my interactions with people in the community were very positive. I know that I had some enemies, who doesn't, who is in a position of authority?

Gender. Margaret became a superintendent when there were few women in this role. She shares, "to me being a woman in this position when there were so few, was a significant piece of my contribution." Margaret details her thoughts on being a female superintendent:

I was very conscious of being among the very first women superintendents, so I have to admit that I always thought about how that impacted the district that I was leading and also what contributions I was making to the world of education. I was the superintendent who pushed the use of technology in my state. I worked with Apple. Apple at the time had a focus on education, smartly knowing if they got kids engaged at an early age they would continue to use the same instruments after they had graduated. So, I've always had what I felt was some responsibility to make sure I was trained right to do the job and I hoped others would follow.

Margaret believes her gender impacted the way others saw and responded to her:

I think it made more of a difference in that people saw me as a woman. It didn't make any difference to me because I am who I am. But, I was conscious of being a woman because people made me conscious of being a woman.

Margaret remembers two times when she was treated differently because people saw her gender and ethnicity first, rather than her ability to successfully make changes in a district. The first time she was a high school principal and the union president challenged her every move and

the second time she was a superintendent and two male community members set out to get rid of her. Margaret describes how the male union president “tried to prevent me from doing a lot of things:”

He’d say, “What gives her the right? How come she can do this?” He always referred to me in the pronoun. I was younger and it was a small district. I actually spoke to the lawyer who represented the school committee and he said, “You know you’re doing it right. Don’t worry, just keep a steady hand and he’ll come around,” and he did.

Ironically, when I left this man actually cried.

The second time she was outwardly challenged because of her gender was when she was a superintendent. This situation forced her to make the conscious decision to find a new job in a more conducive work environment. She remembers:

I made a lot of changes and a lot of people liked what I was doing, but two men in the community who did not like a Jewish woman superintendent and decided they wanted to get me out. I’m the one who said to the school committee, who brought me in and supported me, that their school committee was too small. Five people is too small to not have everybody on the same page. So, these two men ran for the school committee.

Ironically one died, which was sad. I didn’t wish him ill; the timing was coincidental and the other man lost the election. The committee then said, “Why don’t you stay?” but by then I had already put the word out and I had another job offer in a bigger community.

I had to make a decision about whether to stay or leave with my reputation intact and go somewhere else where they did want me.

Margaret wonders how many men have faced similar challenges of having to make the decision to leave a job because of their gender or ethnicity. She notes, she never was sexually harassed at work, but these two stories do demonstrate how others treated her differently because of her gender and ethnicity. Although she does not consider her treatment to be harassment, she notes she was pushed to a place where she had to make a conscious decision about maintaining her reputation. Margaret shares her recent conversation with a colleague about the “Me Too” movement:

In talking to a (male) colleague at lunch yesterday, we discussed how currently all these women are coming forward and saying they were negatively impacted in some way by some male. I never had that experience and maybe it's because I wasn't attractive enough. My colleague and I agreed, and we are about the same age, that in our time that just wasn't done, or at least if it was done, it was not interpreted the way it's being interpreted today.

Voice. Margaret describes the voice that guided her through her career, as “definitive.” She says, “I know how to use the language, but I don't really mince words.” Margaret shares: “I did the right thing and that may sound prideful, but either you do the right thing or you don't do the right thing. It's one or the other. And I think I did the right thing.”

Margaret describes her voice was as “very straightforward” at meetings with the school committee, community members, the leadership team and the union. She remembers a time when all school budgets were being challenged, and she wrote a lengthy newsletter to the community detailing how the budget cuts would impact the district. She recalls receiving a complaint that

she was using district funds to advocate publicly for the position of not cutting the budget. She notes this was the same district where the two community members were trying to get on the school committee to oust her. She shares:

I got a call from a lawyer who was on the oversight committee in the government saying there was a complaint against me for using school department resources in a political campaign. I called the Superintendent's Association which put me in touch with a lawyer who said, "You have two alternatives, one is to go in front of the town at a public meeting and say that this is something that you did and apologize. The other is to calculate the cost of printing the two sentences that referred to the consequences of cutting the budget, and mail a check in." So, I told the School Committee and they said they would pay for it. I said, "No thank you, I have to pay it because they are accusing me, not you." So, it cost \$179.00. I wrote a check, proudly showed the school committee and mailed it in.

Margaret shares, "I'm very conscious today if you see something, say something," and looking back she says the hardest part of the job was firing people and dealing with a teachers' strike. She dealt with public hearings around the firing of a high school principal when she was an interim superintendent and although these times were tough she says "I got through it quite well." When she dismissed an elementary teacher she said the union's support was very helpful and made the process much easier. Margaret shares that she "marched with the teachers during a strike several times to make clear that the teachers needed to get the respect they deserved" and she "worked with the School Committee to settle the strike as soon as possible." She shares:

I remember distinctly the newscasters who came out to do a story and they interviewed me. I behaved, I think in a very, very, civilized manner. I didn't blame the teachers. I didn't blame the School Committee. I didn't blame anyone. I said this is one of those times when people have opposing interests and this is the process that is used to settle such a challenge. So, the lawyer called me after I had already walked with the teachers and said, "I think you should be careful not to do that!" The bottom line is, I used my voice to keep things civilized to prevent a blame game, and to produce, contribute to the production of collaborative, positive, mutually beneficial outcomes.

Margaret describes her voice as "diplomatic and circumspect":

I think I was honest. I told it like it was. I tried to work with people. I had lots of advisory councils. Even though I knew I was the superintendent and that my voice was the voice that would be heard, I tried to reflect what other people were thinking if I thought they were thinking the right thing in the circumstance. In looking back, I can't think of anything that I would have done differently.

Individual Story: Participant F - Voice of Ruth: Risk Taking Theme

Background. Ruth dedicated 40 years to the field of education. She has her Masters in Special Education Administration and Doctorate in Educational Leadership. Ruth began her career as a special education teacher and moved up to a special education administrator and then principal role. From the principal position she moved into the district level administrative positions as Curriculum Director and then Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning. She never planned on becoming a superintendent but at the age of 62 when she was working as the Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning she was asked to assume the role as

Interim Superintendent because the superintendent was going to be fired. The theme of risk taking emerged as Ruth shared her story and detailed the risk she took when she decided to take on the superintendent role near the conclusion of her career. Ruth's story further detailed how she took risks using her voice to repeatedly speak up for closing a building when that was not a popular topic in the community she worked for. Ruth shares that through risk taking, she grew as a leader and stronger advocate for others. Ruth recalls the time period and making the decision to take on a new role as she was thinking about retirement years:

I actually came into the superintendency in sort of a backwards way. I never really aspired to be a superintendent. I had been an Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, which I absolutely loved in a rural district and was set to retire from there. I remember being approached by the school committee chair and being asked if I would take over because they were going to be firing the current superintendent. At age 62, that was really not something I had expected to do and I went home to talk it over with my husband who said, why not. So I agreed to do it, I took over in May when she was let go and was very nervous because I never expected to be in that role. Being a superintendent was really new and there was stuff that I didn't know that I had to learn about.

Ruth was named permanent Superintendent in this rural district where she worked for two more years before she retired. Ruth retired for just three weeks before she received a call to take on another Interim Superintendent position, which she did for five months. She retired again and this time it was three months before she got a call to take on another Interim Superintendent

position for a six month period. Ruth continues to work in the field of education in some capacity in her retirement and she is actively involved with her synagogue. Ruth shares, “I really enjoyed the role of superintendent and being able to make an impact on the districts where I was,” and she believes what she learned about herself as a leader continues guides her work with others today.

Self- Reflection. Ruth sees herself as “a strong believer in tranformational leadership,” and saw her work as superintendent to “engage and support everyone in the district and to build the type of school district that is effective and educationally sound.” Ruth recalls the uncomfortable position she was put in when the school committee asked her to become the Interim Superintendent:

I didn’t really want to be any part of letting the current superintendent go, but knew that it was really the best decision for the district. I gave the school committee a lot of credit for realizing that something needed to be done and not waiting until June. They felt she needed to go immediately and she was let go in the middle of May. I was put in a really difficult position because the school committee began coming to me for advice. I had been supporting the current superintendent even though there were issues, because she was my boss.

____ Upon reflecting on this time period in her life and her own growth in the superintendent role, Ruth shares:

I was planning on retiring in two years and everything fell apart with the current superintendent. Taking on the superintendency, really changed my life. I never expected to be a superintendent and wasn't sure I could be a good superintendent. I certainly learned from being in that position and grew as a person.

I found that I could see myself being much more comfortable (in the superintendent role) and finding ways to learn and grow and not be hypercritical that I wasn't perfect all the time because that was my big issue with being a leader. You can't have every decision 100% and it's very difficult when things don't go the way you think they should have. You get criticized for somethings, and being able to take that and say, alright, so next time, this is what I will do and learn from it. I would make the strong decisions that needed to be made, but at the same time, I didn't have all the answers and I wanted to make sure other people's voices were heard. That really guided the way I ran my districts.

I feel pride in the fact that I had risen to the occasion and been a superintendent and did some things that I thought were very important for school districts. It wasn't all easy going. There were mistakes that I had made, but the feedback that I got from staff and from the feelings that I got from myself, I felt there were some things that I did that were very important and very helpful to the school districts I worked for. I presented a different type of leadership style than the people before me.

Ruth's impression of what a leader does changed over time. She says, "I never saw myself as a leader because of what my impression of being a leader was and it wasn't until I got into some of leadership positions that I realized there were other ways of being a leader." Ruth never saw herself "as the type of gung-ho leader who's always out in front and has all the decisions already made." Ruth admits she was nervous taking over as the Interim Superintendent and her biggest challenge was to show the staff that there were other ways to be a leader than being a dictator. Ruth shares:

I had a really sharp learning curve and it was a scary time. I was very, very nervous. This was in May when I took over and I remember being very, very nervous, but I also remember thinking I now get to do what I felt should have been done all along and what the other superintendent never did. I can remember sitting at school committee meetings and staff meetings (as the Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning) and sort of cringing at the way that she (current superintendent) was running things and doing things, and saying to myself she should be doing it this way. All of the sudden having the power to do that, just really changed the whole style of how the district operated.

When I took over officially, I was working to stabilize the district and establish my own leadership style as well as try to make up for the poor leadership style of the previous superintendent who left the district in some chaos in several areas. It was very nerve racking trying to help with that balance between the old superintendent and establishing myself as the new superintendent.

_____ Ruth established herself as the new superintendent by taking a much more cooperative approach with people than her predecessor. While she focused on “undoing a lot of the bad feelings that the previous superintendent had generated in the district and showing people there was a different way of being a superintendent,” she also made a point to be in classrooms talking with people. She recalls:

One of the first things I did was go around to every school and every classroom, so they could see me in the schools, which the previous superintendent never did. What I did when I went into the classrooms was to look for good things to comment on. I was working to let the staff know that I was in charge and had a different leadership style. I did a lot of listening to people and acknowledging their opinions and their thoughts, but then would say, “Well have you ever thought about doing it this way?” I was able to phrase it in a way that acknowledged their good work, yet also giving them an understanding of my voice and understanding of the situation. I was actually able to get people to come around and do things in a different way. When I was leaving a number of people came up to me and said, “One of the things I remember about you is being at a meeting and you listening to us and then saying, “Gee, this is all great and I loved how you did this, but have you ever thought about doing it this way?”” I was not conscious that I did that, but I worked in a non-confrontational ways and it helped us all grow and see things from different perspectives.

Ruth claims leadership is about building collaborative teams, “where they understand and they are in it with you, where you hold similar values and ideas so that you can move forward as

a full district.” Ruth says, “I know that not everybody was with me, but one of the things I learned was you can’t let those people (who disagree with you) hold you back from doing what you feel you need to do.” Ruth gives the example of working with the parents’ groups and town officials on a proposed override. She remembers when the override failed and how she was able to “keep the school district going and not have everyone being discouraged.” Ruth believes her ability to set a positive tone was very helpful in keeping people focused on the good work they were doing in the district. Ruth explains her leadership style and how setting priorities helped her:

I prefer to hold dialogues with people where we share ideas, and talk about situations, and together work out what would be the best solution. It’s a much more collaborative leadership style. I was able to take that longer view and say, if we’re going to move forward to be a better district, what are some of the long range things that we need to work on? We can’t work on all of them, so let’s pick the ones that we feel are the most important to us. And it can’t be just from the superintendent, it has to be supported by the leadership team and then the staff underneath. I think one of the things that I learned as superintendent was setting priorities helped me to not feel so overwhelmed.

Ruth liked the superintendent role because she was able to use her organizational and process skills and chart out the course of where the district was going with others. Ruth credits her ability to make a difference to building collaborative teams and listening to others. Ruth shares “people felt comfortable talking to me and coming to me, and at the same time they also

listened to me and understood the decisions I was making.” In looking back at her career, Ruth shares:

The only thing that I might have changed would have been to get into a superintendent type of role sooner than I did. It was really a fluke that I ended up there and I never saw myself as someone who could be a good effective superintendent. That belief may have held me back and I guess I was really lucky that the circumstances just played out and that’s where I ended up. I discovered a whole new side of myself that I never realized and never thought that I could be successful in.

Gender. Ruth recalls a time when her gender influenced how she was treated by a group of male teachers when she was a new principal. She was trying to do her job by leading the school with new initiatives and she faced strong resistance from this group. She recalls the situation:

The 5th and 6th grade teachers were mostly male. They were very strong, very negative and against me. It was really my first strong leadership role. I admit being intimidated by them, especially with my leadership style of wanting to be collaborative and wanting to have them with me in order for me to do the things I needed to do. This went on for maybe 3 months and then I had a group of female teachers come to me and say, “We really feel that in order for the school to come together, we want to do this, this and this.” I realized I had been focusing on the wrong group and had been letting the negative people drive and influence the way I was running the school. We turned the school

around by the end of the year and every single negative male bought into what we were doing and became strong advocates and were willing to work with me.

Ruth broke up this group of male teachers the following year and placed them in different grade levels, and she says “this took a lot of courage to do what had to be done and I had the moral strength to know it needed to be done.” Ruth credits the group of female teachers for assisting her with finding her voice as a leader:

I learned a lot from being that principal and it really set the whole way I looked at things.

I wasn't sure what I was as a leader, especially since this was my first real leadership role. I knew what I felt needed to be done, but wasn't quite sure how to do it. I really think those strong women teachers who came to me helped me grow into my role as a principal and as a leader, helped me find my voice and understand how to go about doing what I needed to do despite some of the challenges. This was a real growing time for me.

Ruth shares a time in her career when she believes her gender assisted her with dealing with a very serious situation. As superintendent, Ruth received notification that an ex-employee was being charged with abusing children and although he worked in a nearby district, her district was also involved in the federal investigation. Ruth organized a non-public hearing where parents were able to express their concerns and ask questions and she made sure the media was not allowed to attend. Ruth remembers setting up a very specific structure to this meeting to ensure all voices were heard and telling the federal and state agents this was her meeting and the structure was not changing. It was disappointing for Ruth that the neighboring superintendent

assumed no responsibility in preparing or even speaking at the meeting, even though her community members were in attendance and also impacted by this criminal investigation. Ruth shares:

I think in some ways I was better heard as a female in this situation because I think people saw me as compassionate, a person who was able to listen, and a person who was able to deal with staff and parent concerns and worries, and I think in some ways better than a male superintendent may have been seen. I think being a female at that point was an advantage because people saw me as genuine and people saw me as really understanding and feeling what the issues were. I had strength and understanding, and knowing that as a superintendent, it was my job and my responsibility to lead the district through a very, very difficult time.

Ruth recalls another time when she believes her gender negatively impacted the way her message was being received. As a principal, Ruth brought forth an issue of mold that had been ignored for over 10 years. She shares, eventually the building was shut down because she produced the data and information that was needed to protect her staff and students from this ongoing health hazard. Ruth remembers:

It (my gender) certainly made a difference with the (male) business manager who didn't have a good opinion about female administrators. He was somewhat of a chauvinist and I do think if I was a male principal that he would have accepted the information much better than he did from me as a female. The business manager and some of the school

committee members really questioned my leadership as a female and my knowledge and ability to do what I did.

Ruth also remembers being treated differently because of her gender by the selectman and finance chair when she and her team were trying to get an override to pass:

There were times during the override that I don't think they took me seriously and they tried to marginalize me. I think it was hard because the district finance director was a female, the curriculum director was a female, we were mostly a female leadership team except for one male. There were five selectman and four of them were males who had been selectmen for a long time. There were times when I felt, I don't want to use the word bullying, but I felt that they were trying to dominate us, and they didn't take us seriously. I think they related to us differently than if we had been males and it made some of the conversations around the override very difficult.

Upon reflecting on how her gender impacted her role, Ruth shares:

I think there were times that I should have been stronger and taken on almost like a male role in terms of saying, 'This is it.' Although, I did do that at times, I think there were times I could have been stronger doing that. I think I've grown as that type of leader since I've left the superintendency with some of the other things I've done. I think if I had taken on a more dominant, stronger role, I don't know if anything would have been different, but I think I would have felt better about having been stronger and maybe there would have been times when my points would have been heard better.

So, it was interesting for me to try to set my image as a strong leader regardless of whether I was male or female and still keep my leadership style of being a positive person who listens and understands and tries to see all sides, but still strongly advocates for what I know needs to happen.

Voice. Ruth describes the voice that guided her through her career with the following words, “dedication,” “commitment,” and “moral responsibility”. She says, “I had to really believe strongly in what I was doing and that it was the right thing to do.” Ruth explains she had “the strength to do what was necessary and my voice came out, if I didn’t believe in it, I couldn’t voice it.” Ruth comments on the importance of staying true to oneself:

I think I didn’t do anything differently than I normally would because I believe you have to be the person you are. You can’t create a persona that you think people want to see that isn’t you. That doesn’t work for me. With my voice, I wanted them to see who I really was. And part of that was, yes I’ve got the skills, and I’ve got a lot of answers, but I don’t know everything and I’m going to be honest about the things I don’t know and let you know that I’m going to work to learn those things, but I’m also going to give credit and rely on people who do know those things. My voice needed to be very genuine and it needed to reflect my beliefs and my values and not be a ‘put on’ and not try to project an image of something that I wasn’t.

Ruth used her voice to advocate for a safe building when she was faced with a mold issue that was ignored for over ten years. Ruth reflects upon her moral obligation to do the right thing:

As a principal in a district where the business manager is very powerful and he poisoned everything, I remember making the decision that even if this cost me my job, I had a moral responsibility to do what I did for the sake of the people in that building. I was very scared and it took me a while to be willing to buck the administration and buck the school committee on this issue and bring forth a campaign that I knew was not going to be popular, but that had to be done. It was something that had been out there for so long and so many people had made an issue of it and it had been ignored for so long. And I said, 'No, I've got to do something about it because it had been more than 10 years of this.'

Ruth says, "as the principal of a building where people were concerned about air quality and people were getting sick, I needed to figure out how to deal with the situation in a responsible way." She did not want this to be "headline grabbing" news, but rather she wanted to ensure everyone's safety. She recalls how she worked collaboratively with others to bring forth the data the district needed to take action to close the school:

I realized I needed data to be able to do it. I surveyed the staff and we also did some research on the building and we got enough evidence that the school committee closed the building in the middle of May. We ended up establishing classrooms in all of our other schools. Obviously, the administration was not happy with me. Luckily, the superintendent understood where I was coming from. The business manager was very unhappy with me. It turned out that a parent had kept some study that a group did 8 years

previous and they had come up with the diagnosis of sick air syndrome. That diagnosis had been squashed back then and the problem was never addressed.

Ruth remembers thinking “I’m being tested as a leader,” and feeling “a strong responsibility to be an advocate for the staff and students in the building.” Ruth shares:

My staff were very supportive of what I was doing and when they finally closed the school, there was an emergency school committee meeting at the district office at 3:00 p.m. for them to take a vote to close the school. They didn’t want me to tell my faculty this was happening, but because it was an open meeting, a parent had notified my staff and all the teachers showed up at the school committee meeting and stood silently in the back as they voted to close the school. After the vote, they dismissed me. All the teachers also left and went down to the auditorium. When I walked in they all started cheering me and thanking me which could be heard in the school committee meeting. That did not go over well with school committee.

Ruth expresses pride in her actions:

I stood up for what teachers had been saying for years and they felt that nobody had listened to them. They saw me using my voice and using my moral responsibility to stand up for them and for what I felt was right. I had to have strength in my convictions. I had to have strength to be able to express what was going on and do what needed to happen. I had to have strength for the rest of the staff, parents and kids, I was representing. I had to be strong for all of them.

Ruth vividly remembers having to be very strong during this time. She felt compelled to figure out how to have this issue resolved, so she worked diligently to produce relevant information about the unhealthy conditions and how the mold was making people sick. Her persistence, determination and moral obligation to do the right thing on behalf of her students and staff even kept her from enjoying special family events. Ruth shares how she missed getting her daughter ready for senior prom because she was at the emergency school committee meeting when they voted to close the school:

I remember being strong during that school committee meeting and doing whatever needed to be done. I had to be strong for my faculty, staff and administration. It was my daughter's senior prom and I couldn't be home to help her get ready, which bothered me greatly, but then I drove from the meeting to where she was with her friends just before they went to the prom. I got out of my car, saw my husband and burst into tears from the tension of the day. I just fell apart. This was so many years ago, but it is just still so vivid.

Ruth shares that she modeled a collaborative leadership style and always presented herself as a "real person" who genuinely was interested in the well-being of the people in her districts. She shares her approach:

It is a core value of mine to be seen as part of the community and people have to be comfortable with you coming into their community. I would try to always find something positive to say about the teachers, about the kids, about what the principal was doing, so they didn't see my work, my walkthroughs as finding deficiencies and finding negative

aspects. I wanted to find the good things that were happening and build up a collaborative environment. We're not perfect all the time, but I know everyone is working hard, and it's important to acknowledge the good work that we do. If there are things that we can do better than we work on them and I wasn't there to be critical, but to get information out so we could all work together to build a better place.

In terms of my voice, I used it to represent the community and worked to make it better. I wasn't there to just sign memos and attend meetings. As a leader, I wanted to do something that was going to make the place better and find a mission. Even as an Interim Superintendent, when I knew I was only going to be there for a few months, in each case, I found some things that I did that I felt improved the district and improved the community.

Individual Story: Participant G - Voice of Sarah: Servant Leadership and Integrity Theme

Background. Sarah dedicated 43 years to the field of education, including nine years as a school superintendent for two different districts in the same state. Sarah is not currently working in the field of education in her retirement. The theme of servant leadership and integrity emerged as Sarah shared her story and detailed how respecting others, regardless of who they were, was a core value of hers. Sarah describes herself as “servant leader” and detailed two critical moments where she treated a criminal and an employee who filed a discrimination lawsuit against her, with the utmost respect and dignity. Sarah earned her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, Masters of Education in Reading, and Doctorate in Educational Leadership. She became a superintendent at 55, after working in a variety of educational roles in two states.

Sarah says she “never planned on becoming a superintendent.” Sarah started her career as a second grade teacher, and relocated to another state where she became the first learning-disabled teacher in a middle school for a very large district. Sarah explains this was an outstanding opportunity to learn more about reading and special education because the district paid for her to continue her education and complete her Certification in Learning Disabilities and Supervision. Sarah quickly moved into the role of the Staffing Specialist and Supervisor, where she worked for 10 years overseeing the special education services for 28 schools. Sarah shares, this was “a position that really helped form me and helped me understand parents of kids with all kinds of disabilities and that served me well for the rest of my career.” Sarah explains, “there came a point when there were too many red folders in my life and I really wanted to get back to working with people, not so much the legalities,” so she took a pay cut to become an Assistant Principal. After working two years in this role, she moved up into a Principal position where she spent 13 years working in two different schools.

Sarah explains that a pivotal time in her career occurred when she became a Stephen Covey trainer and she recognized that she “was tired of bus duty, tired of lunch duty, tired of bulletin boards,” and needed more. Sarah applied for and was appointed as the Elementary Education Director, where she and her team were responsible for the curriculum for 84 schools. At this time, Sarah was around 50 years old and she decided to start a doctoral program. Sarah shares:

I'm thinking, you know, if I really want to go someplace, and I do, I really want to go someplace. I just felt my children were in college and it was a good time to start a doctoral program because I just wanted more, I just wanted more. I can't even describe

why, I didn't tell people for a long time. I thought if I hate this, I'm not going to finish.

Why am I doing this to myself? When in fact I have a nice life. But anyways, I persevered.

After two years as the Director of Elementary Education, Sarah became the Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education and Student Services. Shortly after completing her doctorate, Sarah's father died. The family burial site was in another state and during this time her niece planted the seed of applying for jobs as a superintendent back home. Her niece convinced her the districts were much smaller in her home state and Sarah could easily do the job. Sarah shares her thought process:

No one in their right mind does this work, but I had watched some really spectacular superintendents that I'd worked for. And the idea took root and I thought, well I can try this and if it works, it works.

There was never an aspiration to do that (become a superintendent), but I think as you work through the hierarchy of education, you just see some things that you want to do better or you think you can do better.

Sarah eventually moved to another state and became a superintendent where she worked nine years in two different districts serving 5,000 students and 1,500 students. Sarah shares that she retired because her husband was critically ill and her job was a distance from home. Her retirement lasted three months because her husband rebounded and she decided to apply for an Interim Superintendent position closer to home. Sarah remembers they had planned to re-open the search after her interim year, however, they asked her to stay after she was employed three months:

They offered me to stay and I stayed five years. I stayed five years. And then, I was really ready for retirement. And in the meantime, my husband had passed away during those five years and they were incredibly supportive. I couldn't have asked for better experience.

Self-Reflection. Sarah describes herself as a “servant leader,” someone who “was approachable and had skills with bringing people together in a leadership team.” She shares, people saw her as “approachable and open.” Sarah characterizes herself in the superintendent role:

I'm a people person. I consider myself a servant leader. I think the job of the superintendent is to make life smooth and provide the best materials for students and teachers. You are really helping them do their jobs, so you're making their job easier. You're trying to hire the best people so kids have the best instruction. We try to make sure that the environment that the teachers are working in is appropriate and in fact they have a decent contract. Also, you must be willing to do anything to make education better for your kids. You're modeling appropriate behavior as a superintendent and you need to do anything to make education better for your kids and the work environment the best it can be.

Sarah shares, “I have good feelings about being a superintendent” and reflects upon her obligation to treat everyone with respect.

I like to think that I was the most highly paid person in everyplace I worked in as far as public employees. So with that, I tried very hard to be very respectful of every citizen that came, or spoke to me. In one town in particular that was quite progressive, I partnered

with the town to develop a strategic plan so there wouldn't be warrant articles that were in conflict with each other. I still have contacts even though I had been retired for five years, people send me Christmas cards in the three towns that I had worked. That makes me feel really quite good. To tell you the truth, I feel like I was respected and I was respectful.

Gender. Sarah details how she believes her gender was an asset in handling one critical moment in her career when she had to deal with a serious personnel issue involving the Federal Bureau of Investigations, negative publicity and managing the well-being of her students and families. Sarah explains being a female assisted her with “doing the right thing” during this serious situation because she was able to balance accountability with empathy. She saw herself as “determined” and strong enough “to do the right thing.” She had to fire a teacher who was being criminally investigated and support her students and families who were impacted by this big news story. She remembers thinking, “I am not going to degrade this person,” but I am “going to take care of the situation.” She remembers the ongoing pressures from the community for her to hold a public forum and even though a fellow superintendent did so in the neighboring community, she held her ground to protect the confidentiality of the students involved and handled it by meeting individually with families and students in her district. Although, Sarah’s approach took more time and energy, she shared:

I found myself with the Stephen Covey integrity thing. No matter how many people demanded that I have a public meeting, I did not do that. I said, we will respect people's privacy and their own child's welfare and I will be here any time on any day to meet with you and to talk with you individually.

Sarah believes being a female helped her in this particular situation because she was able to find a balance of compassion and accountability. She held a firm stance with the community not to hold an open public forum, while providing ongoing support and resources to families and students impacted. She worked with legal counsel and federal authorities to fire this teacher, and even though she was disgusted by the situation she remembers treating this teacher with dignity and compassion when she met with him. She recalls:

It is not my position to undermine somebody. It's not my position to make life even worse. He is in a federal penitentiary. I am not God. I was going to take care of the situation. He was out of there, and he was never coming back and of course he lost his license and all those other things. It comes down to an integrity thing. I think I did the right thing. Actually, no, I did do the right thing. No one needs to be humiliated any more than they are.

Sarah believes being a female had a positive impact on this critical situation. She claims “the empathy factor for the families and teaches” made the real difference. While she notes males do have empathy, she expressed that being a female in this situation gave her an advantage. She believes her ability to hold her ground and not have a public forum even though was tremendous pressure to do so, in some ways “made a tiny crack in the ceiling, because it showed that I could handle the situation well and into a successful conclusion.” Sarah shares:

Not that you always know when you're doing it, but I think it shows the strength of women in it. It doesn't have to be a male to make things happen the right way to the correct conclusion. Women can also stand by their principles. We are not wussies, we are not.

Sarah shares another time in her career when being a female made things much more challenging. As a principal in a large district a struggling assistant principal was re-assigned into her school. Sarah recalls:

They assigned me a black male who had been in another school and had been marginal. Being the south, you have to understand the particular line of thinking, there was court ordered desegregation, to have so many black students and white students to balance schools and you had to do whatever you could to try to make sure your staff reflected the student population. This was not easy to do. So, this gentleman came to me and I had been a principal for about seven or eight years, and certainly had several male assistant principals before him, but this was one was another story altogether! He really didn't understand that you came to work on time and he didn't understand that I really didn't appreciate him reading the newspaper during lunch duty. So when it came time for his evaluation, he was given a needs improvement in several areas.

Sarah shares she met with him to discuss his evaluation and he refused to sign it. She vividly remembers asking her secretary in the room to witness his refusal and his threatening words; "If you send this in, you are not going to believe what is going to happen to you." Sarah shares:

He filed a discrimination suit against me with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). That was awful. Actually, it was really, truly, awful. But, it was a matter of prevailing, because I was very clear and I had only written up anything that was totally objective, not subjective. So long story short, they came in and ended up interviewing every black person that I've ever worked with.

Sarah remembers the lengthy process of an investigation and hearing along with her own struggle to maintain her composure while being accused of something she did not do. She recalls offering the investigators who were “two nice ladies a cup of coffee and they said they couldn’t take anything from the accused.” Sarah also remembers being anxious about going to the large district meetings and wondering about the impact of this on her reputation:

This was a defining moment and of course I’m afraid to go to these meetings, well not afraid but anxious to go to this big giant meeting we have every month because, there are a lot of minority people that I’ve worked with over the years and I’m really wondering if they’re talking about it. I remember going to the bathroom and one woman in the bathroom, a black lady said, “Sarah, you know, we know who he is, so don’t you worry about anything.” But of course you’re still worrying.

____ Sarah describes herself as “determined” to continue focusing on doing her job during this critical time. She said others did not think less of her and she made a conscious decision not to “throw darts” at the person who was trying to defame her reputation. After eighteen long months there were no findings against her. One year later Sarah got a promotion but so did the assistant principal who accused her of discrimination. She shares:

We had the hearing and it took 18 months and there were no findings. It was just awful. So, again, it’s a Stephen Covey thing, you stand firm. I got a promotion the next year. It’s tough stuff, but it makes you a stronger person and it gives you backbone. You just need to make sure it doesn’t take away the human part of you. I didn’t stand on any soapboxes. I just kept doing my job in the best way that I could do it because you can’t be standing there throwing darts at this person who really didn’t have a

leg to stand on and that wouldn't have made me look better. What I've always said to my own children who are adults is, you don't play in the mud. I'm not getting down in the mud with anyone. I'm just not. So you just have to rise above that kind of stuff. You just take the high road and let them play in the mud. This man was eventually fired for accosting another female years later. But again, you have to remember difficult situations make you stronger if you can get yourself through them.

Sarah shares being a female superintendent did not hamper her ability to create positive change in the districts or communities for whom she worked. Sarah shares a story of the time when her town was hit with an ice storm and everyone was out of power and she organized the school as a shelter. Sarah had extensive training with emergency preparedness from a previous district and was able to assist her local agencies during this crisis. She left her home and stayed at school for several days organizing the shelter and food for those who were displaced by the storm. She remembers during this time her husband was ill and using oxygen and without her knowing the fire department went to her house to set up a generator to ensure her husband was safe during Sarah's absence. Sarah received an award from the town for her selfless dedication during that crisis.

Sarah remembers hosting a safety meeting after the crisis with other superintendents and having a male superintendent being openly shocked that a female superintendent could have done what she did:

So there was a male superintendent from another state attending the meeting. Around the table you've got all kinds of law enforcement people from many communities and they're practicing because it's a tabletop exercise. So this gentleman comes in he said, "Well, I

would really like to talk to the superintendent.” So, I introduced myself and he looked at me like, ‘You’re the superintendent?’ And I thought it was very obvious that he was surprised, shocked, amazed that I was the superintendent because he was expecting a counterpart, I’m sure, a male like himself. It was just so incredibly obvious.

Voice. Sarah didn’t have the aspirations to become a superintendent and feels “privileged” to be able to use her voice to assist others. In particular, Sarah shares “it’s important for girls to see girls can do anything.” Sarah knows her voice was heard because she saw people listen and take her advice and her school board members often voted five to zero supporting her recommendations. Sarah refers to herself as a “people person” and not someone who is easily taken advantage of. She recognizes the reality and difficulty associated with having school board members who do not like you or agree with you and she shares how she used her voice and actions to overcome situations:

There was a woman that really talked about me behind my back. I do think this is a generalization, that women school board members are a little more sneaky than men. Men are more forthright, I think. I always felt undermined in an undercurrent sort of way. She didn’t care for the evaluation system that we use to evaluate me. So, I asked the State Association to send me evaluations that they used for themselves and we ended up with comprising a different evaluation tool, which I really liked more. It was more objective with measurable kinds of things, like how often do you communicate to the public or attend safety meetings.

Moving onto another board in another town, I think there’s still some issues with women working with women. So a school board member that was a woman, I could not give her

the right time of day no matter how hard I tried. I never could fix that she actually didn't like me. Obviously she criticized almost everything I did and it was just kind of bizarre. I continued to just focus on doing my job.

Moving onto the next board there was a male school board member that would actually mimic me sometimes. He would have his glasses down on his nose a little and give me nasty looks, nasty, nasty, looks. It seems like he did a thousand 'Right To Know' requests and didn't really care that it took tons of time. So, you try to do the best you can, but you can't make everyone happy all the time as much as you may want it to be that way. You can lose tons of sleep and thought processes when you're driving to and from places and you're thinking, 'How can I do this? How can I make it easier? How can I involve this person more?' But there always is somebody, who doesn't want to work with you.

Sarah shared a newspaper article from the Sunday paper and a publication from her professional organization where she was recognized as Superintendent of the Year. She says, "if nothing else, you can do more than make cookies when you're a girl!" Sarah credits her successes as a superintendent to her ability to use her voice to always "connect with people" and work collaboratively with the fellow administrators, teachers and town members. Sarah said she always stood by her principles, tried her best to appear confident and strong and had an obligation to do the "right thing" on behalf of the students she served. Sarah stresses the importance of finding time to reflect upon how you are doing your job:

Finding that balance of being wasn't always easy. Always trying to be up and always positive and always available and taking care of small details which make all the other pieces fall in place. In a small district, you essentially have to know and do everything.

You can't do this your whole life during the day for almost every waking hour and not have it spill over into your private life. You have to be strong and you have to think, I can do this and I have to do the right thing all the time. I can't do the easy way out or not address this. That's the other thing I did notice some with some colleagues, they waited and thought maybe it will go away. I always addressed the issue. Maybe, it's more like tenacity of spirit to do the right thing.

Eleven Overall Themes

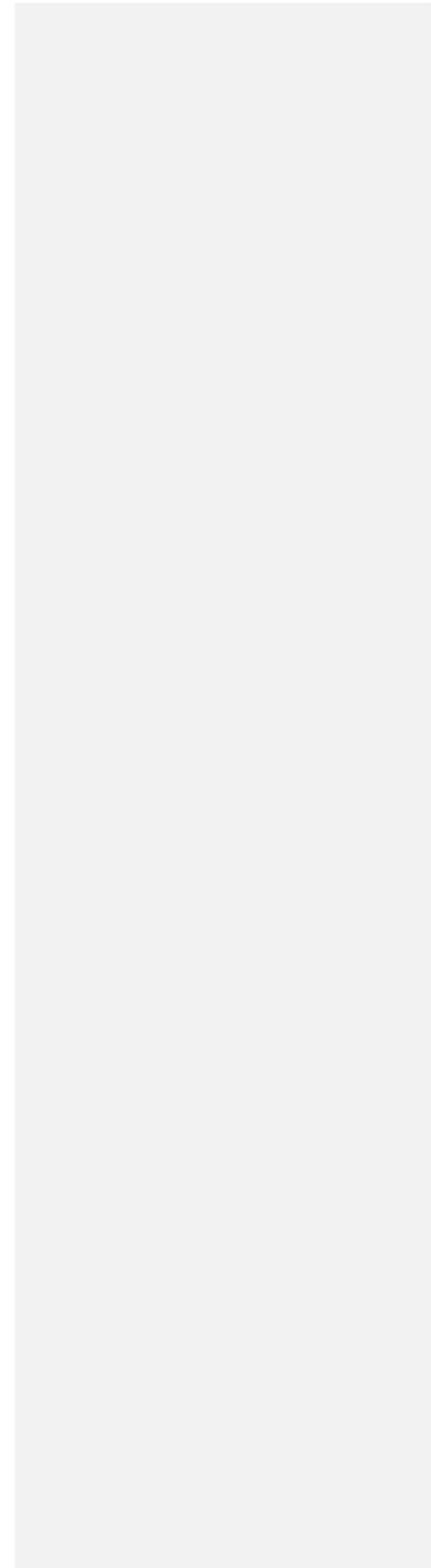
Once the seven individual narrative stories were complete, the researcher began an overall analysis of the interviews from the seven participants. The researcher re-listened to all interviews, re-examined codes, field notes, individual themes, reflected upon the broad thematic categories used to frame each participant’s story (Background, Self-Reflection, Gender, and Voice) and then used NVivo 12 to further explore the text data for themes or patterns. A thorough analysis of the results from the interview questions resulted in the following eleven themes as noted in Table 3, Overall Themes on How Female Superintendents Use their Voices. The eleven themes are described below in detail with examples from each participant’s story to demonstrate the themes.

Table 3

Overall Themes on How Female Superintendents Use their Voices

Interview Questions	Overall Themes
Description of self	<p align="center">Theme 1- Positive Descriptions of Self</p>

Description of critical moments in your career	Theme 2- Doing “What is Right” in the face of conflict/critical moments
Description of how you used your voice	Theme 3- Advocating for self and others
Description of how you think others saw you	Theme 4- A Belief others perceived them as strong leaders
Reflections on your voice and looking back if you would use your voice differently	Theme 5- No Regrets with use of voice
Reflections on pre-existing photographs and your past	Theme 6- Endearing memories
Descriptions of trajectory of your voice over your career	Theme 7- Confidence in voice developed with experience
Reflections on your favorite position as an educator	Theme 8- Ability to reflect on personal growth
Descriptions of your move into the superintendent role	Theme 9- No planned career aspirations to become a superintendent
Descriptions of the voice that guided your through your career	Theme 10- A voice of integrity guides female superintendents
Reflections on the process of being a participant in a self-reflection study	Theme 11- Female superintendents face gender bias
Reflections on whether you think a female voice made or did not make a difference during critical moments	



Theme 1: Positive Descriptions of Self. The results indicate retired female superintendents have positive self-images as evidenced by all participants using positive words to describe themselves. At each interview participants were asked to describe themselves as female superintendents and all participants consistently described themselves using positive words depicting them as caring and dedicated leaders. All participants also described their commitment to the field of education as a “passion,” “a calling,” and “service to others.”

For example, Annie stated, “I was on top of things and very current with what was going on in education and sharing that with other people.” Annie proudly shared, “my strength is being able to teach and lead other professionals.” Fiona shared, “I always had the academic preparation that positioned me for possibilities” of growth and “I am an English teacher so my paperwork looked good.” Fiona describes herself as a female superintendent,

I have always had a very keen sense of self-preservation. And I don't think that's inhibited my ability to do my work. I think it's sort of enhanced it because it's always, do the right thing, do what is right, do what is defensible, do what the evidence supports. It is part of our job to watch out for those in our care, to anticipate the worst case scenario, and to always have a game plan.

Joanne voiced, “I'm a very linear superintendent. So my focus is truly on children and the best education possible for children. Politics frustrate me.” Joanne described herself as “very organized and very definite.” Lisa voiced, “I would describe myself as curious. Try to be humble, innovative, caring, relationship builder.” Lisa further defined her characteristics,

Oh, caring, very caring, very focused, hardworking, principled, always working towards high integrity and I believe that being an administrator still means that you have to be a

teacher at heart. So always trying to teach and coach people, but when I had to be, I can be very tough.

Margaret voiced, “to me being a woman in the position when there were so few was a significant piece of my contribution.” Margaret credited her education for preparing her well to be in the public forum, she shared, “I speak well in public. I’m a former English teacher. I write well.” When asked how she would describe herself as a female superintendent, Margaret pointed out her strengths as a leader and how she advocated for technology in schools. Margaret shared,

My husband often warns me that I’m not the superintendent of the world because I constantly look around infrastructure and organizational structure and try to improve it. So, I saw myself in the superintendent’s role as taking the district for where it was to a better place and in many cases, I took it from a very low level of technology utilization to a very high level and certainly as high as you could be at that time.

Ruth defined her leadership style as collaborative, “I prefer to hold dialogues with people where we share ideas and talk about situations and together work out what would be the best solution. It’s a much more collaborative leadership style.” She further explained,

I’m a strong believer in transformational leadership so that as a superintendent I see myself working to engage and support everyone in the district to help us together, build a type of school district that we feel is effective and educationally sound.

Finally, Sarah described herself as “approachable,” “a people person,” and someone with “skills for bringing people together in a leadership team.” Sarah credited her opportunities for professional development and called herself a “highly trained administrator,” who “knew how to get people to work together.” Sarah referred to herself as “a servant leader,” and shared, “to tell

you the truth, I feel like I was respected and I was respectful. I have good feelings about being a superintendent.”

Theme 2: Doing “What Is Right” In the Face of Conflict and/or Critical Moments.

The results indicate retired female superintendents faced a wide variety of critical moments in their careers and each participant made conscious decisions to do “what is right” on behalf of the students and staff they served when faced with conflict and/or critical moments. Overall, the participants expressed how they felt it was their job to use their voices to right a wrong and to take action against injustices in their districts. Some participants admitted they did what was right, fully knowing there could be personal cost and/or high levels of resistance. The types of situations that caused participants to make a decision about what was right ranged from conflicts with school committee or school board members, firing staff, a discrimination lawsuit, bullying cases, a teacher strike, resistant teachers, dealing with criminal cases and a school shooting. A broad overview of the type of critical moments faced by the participants is portrayed in Table 4, A Broad Overview of the Types of Critical Moments Faced by Participants. A summary of each participant’s critical moments is listed in Table 5, A Summary of Each Participant’s Critical Moments.

Table 4

A Broad Overview of the Types of Critical Moments Faced by Participants

Critical Moments	Participants
Conflict with School Committee, School Board, Community Members	Annie, Lisa, Joanne, Margaret, Ruth

Firing Staff	Fionna, Margaret, Sarah, Joanne
Criminal Investigations	Ruth, Sarah, Fionna
Discrimination Lawsuit	Sarah
Bullying Cases	Annie
Teacher Strike	Margaret
Resistant Teachers	Joanne
Student Shooting at School	Lisa

Table 5

A Summary of Each Participant's Critical Moments

Annie	Fionna	Joanne	Lisa	Margaret	Ruth	Sarah
School Board conflict resulting from compliance to following the laws	Invasion of privacy-Finding someone in her office going through her desk	Push back from Teachers when there was a sense of urgency to update curriculum and instructional practices	Student Shooting in school	Dealing with hearings and the aftermath of a fired principal	Moving into Interim positions mid-year and replacing fired Superintendents	The arrest of a staff member involving child pornography
Ending a Readiness Programs that was not effective	Budgetary Reorganization in Central Office and firing Administrators	Firing a beloved Football Coach	School Board conflict regarding their racial bias' against students	Teachers' Strike	Advocating to close a school due to serious air quality issues	Giving a poor evaluation to an African American Assistant principal and then facing a discrimination

						Lawsuit
Bullying situations involving hearings	Firing a Teacher who falsified credentials	Advocating for a building project	Being the First Female Superintendent	Advocating for Technology in Education	The arrest of an ex-employee involving abuse of minors	Firing a beloved Coach

Five out of the seven participants, Annie, Lisa, Joanne, Margaret, and Ruth, shared stories detailing how doing what they considered to be right for their students or staff required them to stand up against their school committees, school boards, staff, or community members. Overall, the participants shared that they made conscious decisions about “what is right” based on their students’ needs and they used their voices to advocate for change rather than give into existing political pressures to maintain status quo.

Annie did the right thing and stood up to the school board chair who wanted her to break the law and ignore a “Right to Know” request and she also stood up to her colleagues when the data did not support the continuation of a readiness program. Annie shared, “some people saw me as being very antagonistic and opinionated and belligerent, the people who were strongly in the readiness camp, but I was able to convince the school leadership that this was not a good program” and we came up with the new solution of a multi-aged classrooms.

Lisa did the right thing and stood up to a school board member who advocated publically against the purchase of culturally diverse reading books that represented the diverse population their district served. Lisa shared,

It was an exciting time we were rolling out a new reading program that focused on assisting refugees and immigrants who didn’t speak English with books about their own

cultures, but one school committee member said, “We don’t want these kind of books in our schools.” I was shocked and started to try to talk about how books are important parts of children's lives and we how we needed print that reflects student’s experiences, as they should be able to see themselves in books. It was like I was talking to somebody from Mars.

Joanne did the right thing and stood up against an entire community that supported status quo and keeping employees even when the data demonstrated they were not doing their job. Joanne voiced it was “hard to get passed” changing the mindsets of the people in a community when they have all had the same teachers for many years. Joanne remembered how people would say, “they’ve been there awhile, they taught me, my siblings, my older kids, and they are so nice,” and she pointed out “that (mindset) is hard to get passed especially when you’re pushing for more rigor.”

Margaret did the right thing and stood up to faced accusations that she had misappropriated district funds to support a budget override when she had written an eight-page newsletter detailing the district’s budgetary positions. Someone filed a complaint questioning two sentences in her newsletter. Margaret recalled,

I called the Superintendent’s Association which put me in touch with a lawyer who said, “You have two alternatives, one is to go in front of the town at a public meeting and say that this is something that you did and apologize. The other is to calculate the cost of printing the two sentences that referred to the consequences of cutting the budget, and mail a check in.” So, I told the School Committee and they said they would pay for it. I

said, 'No thank you, I have to pay it because they are accusing me, not you.' So, it cost \$179.00. I wrote a check, proudly showed the school committee and mailed it in.

Ruth did the right thing and stood up to her school committee by advocate for closing her school where many people had been getting sick for many years. Ruth remembered thinking, "I'm really being tested as a leader," and feeling a "strong responsibility to be an advocated not only for the staff in the building but for the kids" Ruth described the seriousness of the situation,

A study that a group had done, maybe 8 or 10 years previous, where they had brought in a company to explore this and the company had come up with the diagnosis of sick air syndrome and that diagnosis had been squashed and it (the report) had never gone out. I had a staff member who ended up dying at a younger age and the family really felt that the school was to blame for it because of what she went through.

Four out of the seven participants, Fionna, Margaret, Sarah, and Joanne, shared stories about the negative responses and resistance they faced from their communities when they did what was right and fired ineffective staff. Fionna shared how surprised she was when she discovered the inefficiencies and inflated salaries of her new central office administrative team in her first year as superintendent in one district. She remembers thinking about compliance issues when she realized the personnel office did not have electronic records or keep accurate records. Fionna re-organized multiple central office positions in her first year forcing some people to leave and voiced, "I look back on it and think, oh my God, I can't believe I had the courage/naivete/Chutzpah/balls. I don't know how I did it, but I remember I had data on every single one of them."

Margaret shared how doing the right thing, required her as the new incoming superintendent to hold a dismissal hearing and a public forum, on a high school principal that was let go by the previous superintendent. Margaret recalls,

It was not pleasant. But again, I felt that we'd done our homework, we had evidence for every claim that we made that we didn't make them public. Although a couple of things sort of peripherally had to be attended to because people ask questions and you could only say so many times that's a personnel matter.

Sarah shared how doing what was right for students required her to fire of a beloved coach and fire a teacher she took a calculated risk on because she knew that teacher had been non-renewed in a previous district. Sarah also shared how doing the right thing required her to properly evaluate an ineffective assistant principal who then retaliated against her by filing a discrimination lawsuit. When asked about these times, Sarah voiced,

I'd like to think others thought I was a strong superintendent, that I had empathy, that I didn't pull away from doing difficult things, because I used to say to my husband, that's why they pay me the big bucks. They don't pay me to sweep the floor and they pay me to make hard decisions and do the right thing.

Joanne shared that doing the right thing required her to fire a beloved coach that resulted in personal attacks and significant political fallout throughout the community, which eventually made her decide to retire. Joanne shared,

I had been a superintendent than for 10 or 11 years and I fired the football coach and football was huge in this town. I told the board first. I had done everything right. I know they were fully supportive. I had all the evidence in the world that this person definitely

needed firing, but there was a huge division in the town. I think what happened was that people recognized that there was a problem but they didn't really want it brought to the surface. They were willing to correct it behind the scenes. I retired from that district, which was probably the best thing I could have done because they continued on the same path that I had laid out, but I wasn't there to remind them that they had idolized this person that didn't deserve it and that was a hard truth for them to swallow.

Three out of seven participants, Ruth, Sarah, and Fionna, shared stories about doing what was right when they were tasked with the challenges of protecting the rights of personnel and students during criminal investigations. Ruth discussed the challenges of doing what was right when she organized a forum for parents in multiple communities when an ex-employee was accused of abusing children and how she worked diligently and creatively to protect the confidentiality of students by not allow the press to attend the non-public forum. Sarah detailed how doing what was right required her to display a high level of professionalism when firing an employee who was being charged by the FBI for having child pornography on his computer. Fionna shared doing what was right required her to fire a long-standing employee who had been falsifying his licensing credentials for many years and the difficulties of she faced when a school committee member voiced she wanted to find a way to keep him on staff.

While all seven participants spoke about how doing what was right was part of their job, three of the seven participants, Fionna, Margaret, and Ruth, discussed how particular critical moments pushed them to resign, retire, move on to a new job, or give considerable thought to leaving their jobs due to the challenges they faced.

For example, Fionna shared,

I hope that people would say about me that I really have the courage of my convictions and I will speak to the truth even if it's at personal cost. I would never have continued to work in a district where I felt that I was not making a positive impact or the school committee was moving in a direction that I really did not think was prudent or helpful to students or productive for the for the greater community.

Margaret voiced,

Two men in the town decided that I shouldn't be superintendent because I was a woman. I was Jewish. That's the other critical time when I had to make a decision about whether to stay and hope that they didn't win or leave with my reputation intact and go somewhere else where they did want me.

Finally, Ruth remembered,

Making the decision that even if it cost me my job that I had moral responsibility to do what I did for the sake of the people in that building. I was very scared and it took me a while to be willing to buck the administration and to buck the School Committee and bring forth a campaign that I knew was not going to be popular, but that had to be done.

Theme 3: Advocating for Self and Others. All seven participants were asked to describe how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. All participants expressed they felt they had a moral obligation to advocate for themselves and the students, staff, and community they served. Although, each participant faced different types of critical moments, they all detailed how their voices were challenged in some way by others. All participants shared how they had to examine their own core beliefs and make conscious decisions to continue to advocate for what was “right” in their minds even in the face of ongoing oppositional forces.

For example, Annie shared she would not be silenced by an irate School Board Chair, “He did not stop me. I continued to speak my mind for what I thought would be the benefit of the students and for what I legally had to do.” Annie describes how she advocated for others,

I would act after knowing all sides and all the extenuating circumstances. I spoke passionately about kids, education, and learning, and that was part of why people trusted me to make the right decisions. I acted for the best interest of students, and of course serving the school boards that I worked for. I was mentoring new principals, leading the curriculum efforts in the school districts, supporting all the legal requirements, and following the new trends in trends and policy.

Fionna described the importance of listening to others and how that skill assisted her with doing her job as a female superintendent. She shared,

What I learned is that it was more important for me to acknowledge what I heard. It certainly was more important in most situations to acknowledge that I heard what people said then to respond immediately and tell people what I thought. And I think that having learned that early made my superintendencies enjoyable and not fraught with conflict and it stood me in good stead when there would be a situation that was laden with emotion because my first response was generally not to respond with emotion, but to listen and to say, I understand whether it was, I understand that you're very distressed and what can we do to make this better or I understand that you're frustrated with the way that this was handled. Do you have suggestions as to how we might improve on this next time? Rather than saying, while there were a lot of factors that went into this and you really don't know what all of those were. People don't want to hear that.

Fionna further explained the importance of knowing one's own core values and shared, My voice definitely changed depending upon the situation, it's not fake, and it was savvy to a point. You've got to be careful. I think you have to know what you're doing, otherwise you can change as a human being and it's not healthy for you as a person. And I don't think you can do things that are against your grain, against your values and your core beliefs. I never said things that were against my core beliefs.

Joanne shared how prioritizing students' educational needs put her in a position where she had to act quickly and make changes in a turnaround district. She noted,

I was pretty harsh in my first superintendency. I mean, I wasn't forgiving in those first few years. I wanted the change. I wanted it now and in my head I was saying, these children deserve more, I don't want them to wait three years to get educated, I want it now.

Joanne also spoke about the process of change and how changing the rigor of curriculum assisted with student performance growth. Joanne shared,

As the kids got better and the scores went up and we did go from underperforming to performing plus by the end of the fourth year, that made teachers feel good. Some of them weren't willing to say it was the change that did it, but most of them were. You know, it was a tough four years and I guess my choosing a turnaround district, and to be a turnaround superintendent, I had to stop and think, is this really what I want to do? Do I have the energy and the emotional stability to handle that? That was rough, especially alone. That was really rough.

Lisa shared,

I used my voice in a very collaborative way because it wasn't just about me. It couldn't just be about my voice. It had to be very collaborative, with the high school principal, with the district office, the business administrator, because you're trying to convince somebody who is having to meet a budget every year that another addition to quite hefty addition to the budget is going to be a beneficial thing.

When asked about how she used her voice Lisa shared,

Any decision that you make, has to be about children they can't always speak for themselves. As a superintendent, and as a principal, as a teacher, you have to be willing to have the courage to say what needs to be said on their behalf.

Margaret voiced,

I was very conscious of being among the very first women superintendents, so I have to admit that I thought always about -would the district that I was leading benefit from the contributions I was making to the world of education. I use my voice to keep things civilized, to prevent a blame game and to contribute to the production of a collaborative, positive, mutually beneficial outcome.

Ruth also defined what it meant to her as an advocate for herself and others,

I would have to say strength that I had to have the strength of my convictions. I had to have the strength to be able to express what was going on and what needed to happen and also strength for the rest of the staff and parents and kids. But I was representing, I had to be strong for all of them.

Finally, Sarah defined her role as an advocate and “servant leader,”

My role was to make it as smooth as I possibly could so teachers could teach and kids could learn. Really, if it wasn't for school, it wasn't for kids, then we would have no jobs at all. So, our jobs are servant leaders.

Theme 4: A Belief Others Perceive Them as Strong Leaders. All seven participants were asked to describe how they thought others saw them during the critical moments in their careers. Participants reported they believed others saw them as strong leaders. Words like, “tough,” “hard-nosed,” “pushy,” “compassionate,” “advocate,” “principled,” “organized,” “professional,” “strong,” and “approachable” were used as descriptors of strong leadership.

For example, when discussing the critical moments associated to a bullying situation, Annie shared she was aware that the principal did not like that she was holding him accountable for assisting with solving the situation. Anne reported, “I know the principal saw me as kind of hard-nosed, he needed to step up to the situation and as well, it couldn't be just the school district it had to be the school dealing with it.” Annie expressed, “others saw me as doing my role, being factual and as compassionate as I could be.” Annie felt people saw her “as being an advocate and being a listener,” and voiced,

They would have seen me as a good listener, yet able to make up my own able to make my own decision, that I would act after knowing all sides are all, all the extenuating circumstances, all the factors, that I spoke passionately about kids and education and learning, and that was part of why people trusted me to make the right decision.

Fionna expressed she hoped “people would say about me that I have a pretty well developed, highly developed moral compass.” When reflecting upon the critical moments of re-organizing the central office administrative staff for more efficiencies, Fionna recalled what

others thought of her as a result of making substantial changes with long-standing administrators in her first year. Fiona shared,

Like I said, beyond that petition, I really didn't get anything and I don't even remember it being brought to the school committee. I'm sure the petition was sent to the school committee. I'm sure I told the school community I got it, but I don't remember an organized group of teachers, going to a school committee meeting and I would have remembered that. So, I was amazed given the, the level of over involvement by the teachers in some of the situations. I was surprised that I had no lawsuits. I was just waiting to get one based on age discrimination, racial discrimination or something.

Joanne voiced, "I think in both positions, they saw me as very tough." Joanne recalled the critical moments with firing a beloved football coach and the aftermath of personal attacks which eventually prompted her to resign. She notes,

I don't think anybody realized at that time what an emotional ride it was for me. They all saw me as tough. They all saw me as willing to do the right thing, stand up person. Even my board thought everything was just wonderful. They didn't realize how hard it was, had no clue, and I really tried not for them not to see that. My husband saw that side of course, because would come home with it and you try to leave it at the door, but you're quiet, you're reflective, you don't talk as much you, you wonder about things.

Joanne further commented, she was grateful to the School Resource Officer who understood what she was going through because he knew the details of the situation. She shared he would come and check on her because the resistance from firing the coach "was not just emotional, it

was a physical safety issue.” Joanne also was grateful that the press handled things in a “very positive” manner and only commented on how she had a “tough job.”

Lisa said, “others saw me, as being very professional and tactful. Resolved the things that you're supposed to as a superintendent even though I felt like it wasn't enough,” when discussing the critical moment when the school committee member advocated strongly against culturally diverse reading books for her students. Lisa remembers the support she received from other committee members and what they thought about her stance on this book matter. Lisa shared,

Some of the other members of that committee were, I think, in shock about as much as I was. One of the members of the committee added to what I was saying, by reminding the board member that there was a very distinct policy about whether you can look at a book and see whether it stays in your library or your school or not. So, he reminded the committee member that this really wasn't his job, and that if someone came forward and said they didn't find a particular book as appropriate, they could certainly file a complaint or a concern. And then, and only then would it go before the committee to be looked at.

Margaret shared she used her “voice to keep things civilized, to prevent the blame game and to produce, contribute to the production of a collaborative, positive, mutually beneficial outcome,” and she believes others saw her in the same light. Margaret expressed, “I think people saw me the same way when I finally decided to leave. A lot of people were very unhappy, so that to me is an indication that they appreciated whatever it was that I did.” Margaret also voiced,

I think a lot of people in the community, if they didn't like me, they saw me as a pushy Jewish woman, which is kind of ironic because I'm not a practicing Jew, but I am Jewish. By and large, 90 percent of my interactions with people in the community, one to one and

in public were very positive. I know I had enemies -who doesn't in a position of authority. I was in a challenging community because of very smart people. So it was a very demanding, in an *I know better than you community*.

Ruth shared,

And there were actually a number of people who came up to me as I was leaving and said, one of the things that I remember about you is being at a meeting and you listening to us and then saying, Gee, this is all great and I loved how you did this. Have you ever thought about doing it this way? And getting the whole meeting to turn it around and do it in a different way, but doing it in a way that was not confrontational and you helped us learn and grow and see things from a different perspective. And it was not something that I was conscious that I did. But I had.

When discussing how others saw her during the critical moments of advocating to close her school, Ruth shared,

My staff was very supportive of what I was doing and when they finally closed the school. They called an emergency school committee meeting for like 3:00 in the afternoon when they took a vote to close the school. And they didn't want me telling my faculty that this was what was happening. But because it was an open public school committee meeting, so it had to be broadcast. So, it was the end of the school day and one of the staff members got a call from the family saying, "Oh my God, do you know that school committee right now is closing your school?" So then all the teachers got together and said, "Oh my God, what do we do?" They all came down and showed up at the school committee meeting and just walked in and stood silently in the back as they closed

the school. And then after that was over, school committee continued to talk, but they dismissed me and all the teachers went down to the second floor auditorium. And when I walked in, they all started cheering me and thanking me, which could be heard up on the third floor, which was where the school committee and the rest of the administration was and that made them even more upset with me, I certainly didn't ask for any of this, but, the fact is that I had stood up for what the teachers had been saying for years and they had felt that nobody had listened to them. They (teachers) saw me using my voice and using my moral responsibility to stand up for them and for what I felt was right.

Ruth also voiced others saw her as being in “control” during the critical moments associated with a federal investigation and the arrest of an ex-employee. She arranged and hosted a non-public forum for parents in her community and other communities, and she refused to allow the press to attend. Ruth shared,

I believe people saw me as being strong and in control and still being out there for the community and still being approachable and still listening and still acknowledging people's fears, but very much being in control, which I felt was the most important thing at that point.

Finally, Sarah shared she hoped others saw her as “a strong superintendent and that I had empathy.” Sarah noted she was very aware she needed to appear confident in dealing with the FBI investigation of an employee who was arrested and she believed others saw her as both “confident” and “reassuring” during that critical moment. Sarah voiced,

I didn't pull away from doing difficult things because I used to say to my husband, that's why they pay me the big bucks. They don't pay me to sweep the floor and they pay me to make hard decisions and do the right thing.

Sarah also shared that one community recognized her for her “selfless dedication to the community” and presented her an award at Town Meeting for facilitating emergency shelters at her schools during an extended ice storm. During this critical moment, Sarah shared she recognized just how close her ties were to this community, because she slept at the schools to care for her community and the local officials went to her house to set up a generator and check on her husband who was ill at that time.

Theme 5: No Regrets with Use of Voice. All participants were asked to reflect upon whether they had any regrets with the way they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. All participants stated they had no major regrets with how they used their voices as female superintendents and all expressed some level of gratitude for being able to serve as a female superintendent.

For example, Annie voiced,

No, I don't think so (change my voice). I think that I did speak out. I was pretty passionate about what I believed in and you know, stood that ground. Even though people knew that I heard what they had to say, I wouldn't compromise my own beliefs. I tend not to regret but to move on. In a lot of situations where I played intermediary, people saw me as being an advocate and being a listener, you know, even though I may not have agreed with them, they felt that they had been heard, which for a lot of situations, just diffused the situation.

When discussing the critical moments associated with the bully situation, Anne commented on the positional power that comes with the superintendent role and notes that even though the assistant principal had mentioned important facts about the case, it wasn't until she stressed it at the hearings that the information was heard. Anne shared,

The only thing I might've done, hindsight being wonderful, is I might've said something earlier in the first case, about girl A who was just trying to be friends again with girl B, she never threatened her, and the only reason it was seen as bullying is because she used her friends to try to influence the other girl to be her friend again. If I had said that sooner, this may have been resolved sooner. I think it was said by the assistant principal, but really noted. So my voice as superintendent might have been a little bit stronger if I had reiterated what he had said and in my case might have ended this sooner because the lawyer on the girls' side probably would have stopped because he would have seen had no case. So the only regret I have is not speaking out sooner. But I thought that the assistant principal had been heard because all I did was reiterate what he had said.

Fionna voiced although she had some difficult critical moments in her career she had no regrets. She noted, "Even though I spoke my mind, I have not found myself in a position where I had to leave a position because I was at odds with my immediate supervisor or with the school committee." Fionna makes the connection between following your core values to having no major regrets and shared,

I also think that is to be an effective superintendent, you really need to be who you are. And generally people will give you a break if they see an internal consistency in what you say and what you do over the years because they can trust you. They know that what

they see really is what they've been getting all along and what they'll continue to get because that's who you are. So I think authenticity is pretty important.

Joanne shared that she had two very different experiences in two very different communities. In the turnaround district, she had to take immediate action to remedy low performance and personnel issues, which in turn caused some turmoil. When looking back on her career, Joanne notes,

The only thing is, I think I would have more patience to develop an understanding of where I was coming from and the teachers, we were not on that same page yet. It was really important to look at my audience and say what professional development you've had. What experiences have you have? How are we lined up yet?

Joanne also pointed out the existing culture of a district impacts a superintendent's actions, which in turn impacts how the community perceives their leader. In looking back at her two very different districts, she admits she would most likely do the same things to advocate for rigorous curriculum and effective teachers. She shares,

I think they in both districts, they saw me as very tough. I'm very organized, very definite, but the second position they saw me as approachable. I don't think they would have used that term in the first position. I remember one of my nurses and my second position saying, before I come to you, I have to stop and ask myself, do I really want the truth, because I might not like what the truth is, and she said, and when I decide, whether it's good or bad, that I want to know so I can be better, then I come to you, and that was good to me.

Lisa noted that she had no major regrets as a superintendent. She noted the school shooting as “one of the most difficult times” in her career, but a time where the “community came together, school board and everybody.” She said, “everyone was on the same page and the district was different after that” and they were very fortunate there were no fatalities. Lisa had no regrets with how she used her voice “to calm people down,” “talk to the community,” and educate other districts on safety preparedness. She notes that “everyone had everyone’s back” after this incident. When asked if she would have done anything differently, she responded,

I really can’t think of anything, because the first thing we did that day was all of the team came together and we sat in a room and we planned every single thing out. The next day was Saturday. We planned how we would deal with the media, how we would deal with the kids and parents and who would be there and who would not. And we planned how we would open school back up again, and how kids didn’t have to use the cafeteria for two or three weeks until they were ready. All those kinds of things were planned out in detail. And then we also, which I think was so critical, we had a round table with all law enforcement and talked. We made a few changes to our safety plans, but all in all, this child survived, which was a miracle and we just gave as much support as possible to the kids and teachers.

Lisa further commented, “I’m proud of and looking back and seeing my voice was always about the kids.” Lisa also noted leadership “is about social justice and doing the right thing,” and “leadership is really about courage.”

Margaret shared, “No (I wouldn’t change my voice). I think I was honest. I told it like it was, I tried, I worked with people, I had lots of advisory councils.” When asked if she had do anything differently, Margaret responded,

Looking back, I don't think so because among other things, I was very active on the Superintendent's Association. I started the technology task force. I did a lot of educating very carefully, because when you're a public servant you can't lobby or even advocate. I didn't use the word advocate, but I did a lot of educating of legislators. And to this day, I know a lot of legislators by first name, so I am pretty happy with that.

Margaret also shared,

I set up teams as much as possible, so I try always, even though I knew I was the superintendent, my voice was the voice that would be heard, I tried to reflect what other people were thinking if I thought they were thinking the right thing in the circumstance.

Ruth did not have any major regrets but reflected upon whether or not things would have been different if she had been more forceful and acted more masculine. She shared,

I think there were times that I should have been stronger and [taken on almost like a male role in terms of saying, ‘This is it.’](#) Although I did that at times, I think there were times that I could have been stronger doing that. I think if I had taken on that more of a dominant, stronger role, I don't know if anything would have been different, but I think I would have felt better about having been stronger and maybe there were times when my points would have been heard better.

Finally, Sarah shared she has no regrets and said “you're modeling appropriate behavior as a superintendent that you need to do anything to make education better for your kids. Sarah said,

No, I don't have any regrets. I think I have been totally blessed actually. Do I wish I knew more when I first became a superintendent, of course, but I don't think you can learn it and do it until you do it. So, there's always that first year of whatever, whether you're a first year mom or you're a first year teacher or a first year superintendent, it's always tough stuff. Tough stuff.

Sarah also shared, “I didn't have an aspiration at all to be a superintendent actually ever. But, I'm very privileged to have been one.”

Theme 6: Endearing Memories. Four out of the seven participants shared pre-existing work-related photographs at their last interview. These participants detailed what they were thinking at the time of the picture and their current day thoughts on their career, and how they used their voice as a female superintendent. All four participants reflected upon their past experiences with an endearing sense of pride.

For example, Annie noted,

These are the kinds of pictures I would take while I was on the job. Here's one, we would meet as administrators and fill a whiteboard with notes and list things that we were going to do, the path, the journey, brainstorming, parent component, consistency, fidelity to programs. Here's one staff member with a cheese ball with pecans in look made it look like a Turkey, we'd celebrate birthdays, holidays together. Once when, I was not able to attend a budget meeting in one of the towns, the school board chair, the superintendent,

the school principal, and the business administrator, took a picture either before or after the meeting and sent it to me just goofing off. Here's one, I was volunteering for appraising destination imagination and I continued to do that. I would take pictures when I visited the schools and here is one at one of the elementary schools when it was still pretty much winter, very early spring, and yet the crocuses were out and looking good. And here's another picture when I was also big sister to a little girl in the community. Here's one of the school plays, Princess and the Pea, I would go to plays and evening events and just take pictures of the kids. It's just nice to remember what you're doing it for, that you're doing it for the kids.

Lisa shared,

I also was trying to educate through a newsletter, so certainly these (newsletters with photographs) were for everyone in the district, but they were especially for the school board, who were not as supportive as I had hoped they would be. The first picture was taken in one of the schools where they had a grant and the P.E. teacher was teaching them (students) different kinds of dances and the dances were from all different cultures. I'm not actually in this picture, but I took it because I thought it was important for people to see how culturally diverse we were. So, in this particular picture you can see about a dozen kids doing their dance. At the time the gym was packed with parents and there were also a school board members and other guests there. And when I reflect on it, I see all kinds of different cultures and diversity and just such a positive event for school board members to really see what kids are capable of doing, see that they're having fun, to see *their* kids and we have to do everything we can to be supportive. I think as a

superintendent you are in a fishbowl all the time, people are watching who you are talking to, what you are doing. And I thought it was really important to be in classrooms and schools. Well, plus I loved it. I mean who wouldn't want to be there, it's the best part of the job. Just being there (in schools) I used my voice to be supportive and then was able to easily express all the positive things kids are able to achieve.

Furthermore, Lisa shared, “Looking at the pictures was a really positive thing because it reminded me of why I was there. I wasn't there to please the board. I wasn't there for politics. I was there because of kids and teachers.”

Ruth voiced,

I think I feel pride in the fact that I had risen to the occasion and been a superintendent and done some things that I thought were very important for the school district. And as I said, it wasn't all easy going. There were mistakes that I had made. But from the feedback that I got from staff and from the feelings that I got from myself, I felt that there were some things that I did that were very important and very helpful to the school district. I found my staff badge and it was interesting for me to reflect on this one because it was when I was first hired as the assistant superintendent and had no intention of becoming a superintendent. (Smiling) I was planning on retiring in two years and then of course everything fell apart with the current superintendent and I was asked to stay on and take on the superintendency. Reflecting on how that had really, really changed my life- I had never expected to be a superintendent and wasn't sure I could be a good superintendent and certainly learned from being in that position and grew as a person and then went on as you know, to be an interim superintendent and to other school districts. It was

interesting thinking about when this was first taken and what I expected to happen from being the superintendent.

Ruth also shared,

It was interesting because another picture that I found was when I was a principal, looks like we're in the cafeteria. I am realizing that one of the things that was always important to me as the principal and the superintendent was to be out in the schools and to be out in the classrooms. And when I became superintendent immediately did that so that I could introduce myself to the teachers, and they knew who I was, and I got a feel for schools, and I got a feel for classrooms, and I got a feel for my administrators and what was happening, and that feeling that was an extremely important part of the job. And remembering how difficult it was, in terms of feeling like you're stuck in your office with all of these major decisions and paperwork and timelines and finding the time to do it.

Sarah reported,

Well, it was not so easy at my age to find pictures, but I did. So, I have one from the Sunday paper and it's when I was the superintendent of the year for my state. So, that was very special to me actually. Here's the newspaper article and then my professional organization did an article as well, which is a little bit longer and of course. You know, you need to save that for your children, right! I didn't bring the picture from the national conference where I was given an award, but I'm amazed actually, because of course this, in my opinion was the pinnacle of my career to be recognized by other people. It was pretty awesome. My children came with me to get the national award and probably the significant thing about that was it was just a few weeks after my husband had passed

away. So, it was sort of everything. The event was really hard for me, but it was good because both my children came and we were altogether.

Theme 7: Confidence in Voice Developed with Experience. All participants were asked to describe the trajectory of their voice over their careers. All participants described how their confidence developed over time and through their varied experiences. Participants explained how their opinions of themselves and convictions in their words and actions grew stronger over time and with experience. For example, Annie noted,

Definitely, my voice was more pronounced at the end of my career. I always knew what I stood for and always spoke to my beliefs in education. But I would say, I came on even stronger the older I got and with the more experiences I had. I'm an introvert, I'm not an extrovert and in this position, you have to be out there.

Annie also reflected upon how she was much more prepared the second time she moved into the superintendent role,

I was much more confident in my experience (second time) and knowing educational law, knowing how school districts ran, I knew budgets when I was an elementary principal, but it's just not the same thing to run a school district. You know it's the scope, it so much bigger. And at that point (taking on the co-superintendent role), you know, it was like, 'Okay, I'll do this, I don't have that many years before I retire. This is my contribution to the profession.'

_____Fionna shared, "I think my voice was pretty consistent and strong" and admitted she became more confident in her own abilities through her experiences. Fionna was aware of her internal voice as she experienced quiet critical moments in her career. She shared,

So, there are those quiet kinds of moments of crisis. I think we all can think of big moments of crisis and will we learn something. But the quiet ones, might not have been crises to other people, but they might have been a moments of recognition where you say to yourself, 'Okay, I'm learning something here and I won't do this one again.'

_____ Fiona recalled how she learned to develop her skills through quiet moments. She shared how she took steps to look more closely at the details of what was really going on in situations and by taking these extra steps, she learned more about her own leadership abilities. She shared,

I remember once I had a school committee meeting and it was a small district and the fiscal woes were escalating. Maybe I should preface it by saying I came into that district, another superintendent had left in January and when I first got in there I requested that a financial audit be done. Because I'm thinking to myself why did someone leave and go to another state midyear when his lived in this state. I just questioned some things. And again, I certainly don't want to say anything to malign any other human being because that's not my intent. Anyway, I'm glad that we had an audit done because sure enough there were major problems with special education and allocating monies from someplace else to spend when they hadn't been budgeted that way. So there were some irregularities there.

_____ Joanne shared her trajectory as a leader and how she grew from someone who was directed by her school boards to someone who was afraid to leading and speak up to her school board. Joanne voiced,

In the beginning I was a little shy, a little reticent to really explain where I saw education and the need for education. So I would take more direction from boards, I would listen to

the teacher's union and try to find a compromise. As I got older and more sure of what I should be and what the goal was, I would continually bring it back to, *that might be good for you, but is that good for our children?* That would be my premise to make a decision and I didn't have to be popular. I didn't have to be well liked as long as what I knew what I was doing was the right thing to do.

Lisa noted,

I think my voice was definitely more pronounced in the later years, just because of the confidence that you build, even though you can't make it up, as we know everyday is a different situation. I just think that in making decisions you're more confident. You have just so many more layers of experiences that you can speak from. You've met so many people and you've talked to people and you have a really good sense of what a community wants and needs. It's a lot easier to just feel more exacting and more and more powerful in what you have to say with more experiences.

Lisa also shared, you have to model that you have the “courage to try something” and “my voice was seen as innovative,” and “you can take a risks and if it doesn't go well, well that's okay.”

Margaret shared, she had “a lot of retroactive confidence” that she did a good job, but she was aware there were “times when politics got in the way as they do with things like school committees.” When reflecting upon the trajectory of her voice, she noted her voice was always strong. She shared,

I think my voice was pretty evenly distributed, quite parallel challenges almost every place I went. I think I was diplomatic and circumspect. I think I said it the way I thought

it was. I think I was tactful, as a former English teacher I choose my words carefully both in speaking and in writing.

Ruth reflected upon her confidence levels and noted,

I would say the later years my voice was more pronounced. When I first became superintendent it was in the midst of this whole chaos with the previous superintendent. I had never been a superintendent. I wasn't sure if I had the skills and the capabilities to be a good superintendent. And I was lucky in that I have a very close friend who had been a superintendent and she mentored me.

Ruth also connected her core values to how she used her voice. She stated,

I didn't do anything differently than I normally would because I believe you have to be the person who you are. You can't create a persona that you think people want to see that isn't you. For me that doesn't work. And with my voice, I wanted them to see who I really was. And part of that was yes, I've got the skills and I've got a lot of answers, but I don't know everything and I'm going to be honest about the things that I don't know and let you know I'm going to work to learn those things, but I'm also going to give credit and rely on people who do know those things. And feeling again that my voice needed to be very genuine and it needed to reflect my beliefs and my values and not be put on and not try to project an image of something that I wasn't.

Finally, Sarah shared how her levels of anxiety increased with the years of experience she had. Sarah stated,

I'm not sure it's a matter of age, but the more I did it, the more I would worry or be anxious. I don't remember being so internally judging earlier in my career. Is it really

wisdom when you realized that there are 16 ways to Sunday to do something? You want to always do the right one and have examined all the different options. I certainly was privileged when I look back to be recognized for my work and to be appreciated.

Sarah explained the importance of knowing one's role while maintaining integrity during difficult situations. She shared,

I think I understood my role. My role was to make it as smooth as I possibly could so teachers could teach and kids could learn. And really if it wasn't for school, if it wasn't for kids, then we would have no jobs at all. So, our jobs are servant leaders, but the Stephen Covey training, which I have kept through adversity, gives you the integrity that you if you lose, you never can get it back. So, I'm trying always to take the high road that would be the most appropriate thing for me to do. And I have stuck to that through several situations that were not pleasant.

Theme 8: Ability to Reflect on Personal Growth. Participants were asked to reflect back on the critical moments in their careers and reflect upon whether they would change anything if they could. During this process five out of seven participants shared the following reflections about their own personal growth:

Annie voiced,

If I had to change anything I probably would choose not to have moved into the superintendent position so early. I went into an assistant superintendency before I was ready then went back to a building principal. I was not as effective as I could have been if I had waited. I was ready to the second time.

Fionna stated,

I think the only thing that modulated a little bit over time was my way of conveying my thoughts, my ideas to other human beings. When I was a teacher, I was much less filtered, but as a teacher one can be much less filtered. As a counselor, I had to get along. I had to listen to teachers who were telling me about their students, parents, or the principal. I was listening to the principal who might've said, this teacher is ineffectual. I was listening to parents who were saying, my kid is out of bounds- I can't do anything- I love him, but he's acting out, or saying their child's teacher is an idiot and my kid is a saint, you know, all these scenarios. So, you learn very quickly, you need to edit yourself sometimes or you don't get to be effective. I don't remember anybody ever teaching me that. I remember just learning it. I think as a teacher I didn't really think twice about it because teachers sometimes can be very egocentric. I think infantile in the sense that they don't step back and look at the bigger picture. So, I think I learned it to modulate my voice in order to be effective.

Joanne noted,

There are some times when I think I probably could have done somethings a little differently, but at the time you make the decision based on what you know. I think if anything, I would do more training with teachers rather than just expect them to know.

Lisa shared,

Sometimes I think back and wonder if I was angry with something, people would tell me it doesn't show, you always look calm, you always look cool, you're always respectful.

But inside, I wonder if I had lost my cool once or twice, would that have made a difference or would it have been worse? It probably would have been worse. But you

can't help wonder. And I think too, because you're a woman people interpret you losing your cool differently than when a man loses his cool.

Finally, Ruth voiced,

The only thing that I might have changed would have been to get into a superintendent type role sooner than I did because it really was a fluke that I ended up there as I never saw myself as someone who could be a good effective superintendent. That belief may have held me back and that I guess I was really lucky that the circumstances just played out and that's where I ended up. I discovered a whole new side of myself that I never realized and never thought that I could be successful in.

Theme 9: No Planned Career Aspirations to Become a Superintendent. All participants were asked to share how they became superintendents and the six of the seven participants answered this question noting they did not actively plan to become superintendents. Some participants described having mentors “push” them to try the superintendent role and other participants referenced “situational luck” as another factor that guided their move into a superintendent role.

For example, Annie shared how she moved into an assistant superintendent role too early in her career and returned to a principal position and returned later on to an assistant superintendent position, which then led to a co-superintendent position. Annie shared, “it’s almost like I wasn’t thinking about heading down that path, but it opened up for me and I did take advantage of the situation” and “it was just kind of a natural step.” Fionna said, “the more you do, I think the more your eyes again are opened.” Fionna shared,

I had not intended to be a superintendent, but as we all know when we try one role than our eyes are open to other roles. And I was sort of pulled, kicking and screaming to take on another role way back when.

Fionna further explained she never set out to become a superintendent, but feels lucky to have become one. She shared, “it was really kind of a lark. I had no expectation I would get a superintendency first time out.” She voiced,

I would describe myself as a superintendent who came to the position not having planned it for two decades before or three decades before it. I had envisioned myself as a classroom teacher. I love teaching and walked into positions of leadership through a kind of a natural progression after having been exposed to different positions for the most part by male mentors with whom I worked. I moved into the superintendency probably in a manner that's fairly nontraditional. I was just lucky, you know, I was just unbelievably lucky.

Joanne remembered being persuaded to move up to a superintendent position by her boss. She shared,

I had been a high school principal and an elementary principal and my superintendent at the time said, “I really think you need to move up, you need to take more control, more challenges,” so I applied for a position close by and got it.

Joanne remembers her internal voice and the influence her boss had on her thinking,

There's more that you can do and a neighboring district had an opening and a very challenging district and he truly pushed me to apply and I thought, well, it wouldn't hurt to apply and interview, see what it was all about and I got the job and then I had to make

the decision whether to take it or not, but it was exciting and it was challenging and I thought at the time, well maybe instead of just affecting my own little school, I could be a voice for the children for an entire district, which was a huge challenge and one that I was willing to embrace.

Margaret reported that she was encouraged to apply when her superintendent left, but she did not apply because she was worried that she might not get the position. She explained her thought processes,

One time, when my boss, the superintendent -I was assistant superintendent with, by the way with whom I still have lunch every five or six weeks- decided to leave. We had a wonderful relationship. He didn't particularly like being superintendent, so he said to me early on, whatever you want to do, just tell me you're doing and do it. When he decided to leave, I had the opportunity to apply to replace him or not. It was a rather difficult decision making time, because on the one level I knew I could do the job, on a second level, I didn't want to apply and not get it. And there was some talk of wanting to go outside to get someone in from another perspective. So, after conversation with the head hunting organization that the school committee hired, I decided not to apply. Then in retrospect, and later everybody said to me that was a foolish decision or you should have applied because they brought in someone who was absolutely dreadful and who lasted three years, which again, further emphasize the fact that I should have applied.

Ruth shared she never wanted to become a superintendent and voiced,

I actually came into the superintendency in sort of a backwards way. I never intended to be a superintendent. I never really aspired to be a superintendent. I was the Assistant Superintendent and asked to take over for a superintendent who was asked to leave.

Ruth remembered being set to retire from her role as assistant superintendent and that she would have never expected to become a superintendent at age 62. She shared,

I had been an assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, which I absolutely loved in a rural district and was set to retire from there. And then they ran into some problems with the current superintendent and I was approached by the school committee chair and asked if I would take over a superintendent because they were going to be firing her. And at the age of 62, that was really not something that I had expected to do and went home and talked it over with my husband who said, 'you know, why not.' So I agreed to do it, and took over in May when she was let go and was very nervous. That was not really a role that I expected to be in.

Finally, Sarah expressed it was all "by accident" that she moved into the superintendent role. She shared,

It wasn't like when I was 18, I said I want to be a superintendent, that is not at all the way it happened. It was by accident, I started as a second grade teacher and moved up to special education positions, principal positions and central office positions.

Sarah returned to her home state for a family funeral and her niece ask her to apply for a superintendent job back home. She remembered thinking "that was the craziest thing I ever heard," but she applied anyhow on a whim and ended up getting the job. Sarah noted, "there was never an aspiration to do that (become a superintendent)."

Theme 10: A Voice of Integrity Guides Female Superintendents. Participants were asked to describe the voice that guided them through their careers. All participants shared their beliefs that the voice that guided them through their individual careers was one that was grounded in integrity. Participants used words such as: “principled,” “honesty,” “moral compass,” “definitive,” “legal,” “integrity” and the phrase, and “the right thing to do” as descriptors of their voice.

For example, Annie explained her voice as, “compassionate, from a standpoint of knowledge, advocating from knowing both sides and from what was best for the students.” Annie stated she felt it was her job “to be honest, be yourself, speak the truth and be courageous in the face of opposition.” Annie shared, “I would act after knowing all sides, all extenuating circumstances, all the factors, and I spoke passionately about kids and education and learning.” Annie also noted, “I was an advocate for teachers and students.”

Fionna pointed out the importance of connecting one’s voice to their moral compass. She voiced,

I think people have a moral compass and they make a decision based on the principles by which they live, the experiences which have informed those principles, the people who they live with informs those principles in terms of their moral fiber.

Fionna further explained her own voice and shared,

My most important voice was the voice of principal. I've always known that no matter what anybody else says, I'm the one who wants to sleep with me at night. And I'm the one who stays awake, if there's something I did that was not the best I could have done it. That really sounds like a Pollyanna thing, but it's really the truth. I think the voice of

principle is the most important thing. It's a set of basic tenets by which we live and we pretty much have to go through life with. You know, that's your skeleton, that's your moral skeleton really. And if you don't have that or if that's crumbling in some area, then how do you make decisions? How do you evaluate what's right and what's not right?

Fionna pointed out superintendents are required to problem-solve on a daily basis and she noted her collaboration with her administrative team assisted her with maintaining a “principled” voice. She shared,

We talked about problem solving because that's one of the great things about the job. I really miss that. I miss problem solving, and I miss working as a member of a team. I miss those two things because I was so lucky. I just had great, unbelievably great administrative teams.

Joanne said, her decisions were always made by asking one question, “was it right ?” She shared her reflections on how she made decisions,

Is that right? Is it right for kids? Is it the right time? Is it right for teachers? Is it right for the community? But always preface it with, Is it the right thing to do right now? Another big takeaway for me is call my attorney, call my law firm earlier rather than later and call sometimes just to talk because I found lawyers are the ones that could talk me down or tell me what else I needed. I have never had one tell me what I was trying to do was incorrect, but they helped by telling me what I needed to be successful legally.

Lisa also said, her decisions were about doing the right thing,

When you read about leadership, it's really about courage. I have always been big on the *Level Five Leadership*. And one of things to *Level Five Leadership* says that you're not

afraid to fire your brother. Even though that kind of speaks to personnel in a broader sense, it speaks to you, you can't be afraid to speak up and you try to do it in a professional way. It's about social justice and doing the right thing. So I had to take a chance and I just couldn't let it go by.

Margaret described the voice that guided her through her career as "definitive." She said, "I know how to use the language, but I don't really mince words. So definitive is the word."

Ruth voiced,

Dedication, commitment, and moral responsibility have guided my voice. I had to really believe strongly that what I was doing was right and was the right thing to do in order to have the strength, to do what needed to be done and have my voice come out because if I didn't believe in it, I couldn't voice it or be responsible for following through and working on what I felt strongly needed to happen.

Finally, Sarah shared,

I think integrity. Just gotta have it. Because once you lose that, you're no one, you're done. You don't tell the truth, you hide information, you're not professional, you are done. I think the high road, you know, you just have to stay there.

Theme 11: Female Superintendents Face Gender Bias. Participants were asked to respond to whether they thought having a female voice made or didn't make a difference. Each participant referenced different experiences along their careers when they felt their gender impacted them in both negative and positive ways. All seven participants felt the gender biases they were exposed to impacted their own words, actions and beliefs.

For example, Annie felt that her school board chair, who was irate with her for complying to the “Right to Know Laws,” held his grudge against her longer because she was a female. Annie said,

Possibly someone else with a different personality than what I have might have been able to diffuse the (male) board chair better than I could have, but I think the fact that I was female gave him, I guess a license to be critical.

She also felt that “he would have calmed down” sooner if she was a male. She stated his behavior towards her, made her aware that she had to take extra steps with her communications with him, to ensure he “felt” informed at all times. Annie also pointed out that being a female superintendent positioned her very well to develop relationships with others. She reported she always took the necessary time to listen to others and this assisted her with building a culture of trust and respect. Annie stated,

I don't know if it's male or female, but I certainly feel that I was able to listen to all sides and I was praised, acknowledged for being able to summarize, acknowledge what other people said even though I didn't agree with them and people saw that as not necessarily a compromised position but that they had been heard and I think that really helped to facilitate my job as superintendent.

Fionna shared,

I didn't come in and say since I am a female I would do things differently from a male. But I do think females can be easier targets. Some human beings in the larger culture hold women to a higher standard or a different standard than they hold men. I know that's slowly changing, but it's still there to some degree. Here is an example, I remember the

story of a female superintendent coming back from a dinner on her own time who was stopped for driving under the influence. She was cited and fired. Well, technically she resigned after an emergency meeting of the school committee. I also remember the story of a male superintendent who was found passed out, dead drunk in his car during the school day, and he did not lose his job. For a guy to get drunk on the job is not smart but is deal-able; for a woman to get drunk is immoral and terminal. Different places, I know, but women are often held to a higher moral standard.

One time Fionna found a male administrator going through her desk on morning and she remembered how she maintained a higher moral standard and simply asked him, "Is there something I can help you with?" Fionna shared,

He got up, he backed away and he walked out of the room. Since he was such a townie and he was a gossip, I didn't know what else to say. He was already kind of spreading, sharing with people that he wasn't fond of me.

Fionna noted she was very glad to have caught him in her office and believed her calm reaction sent a very strong message to him. She did not want to get into a "match" with him because he was on the brink of retirement. She shared her thinking,

I knew this is what I need to do to and I figured I have x number of months. If he really can't stand it, he will leave and retire because he could. I will watch him carefully and I will be very careful myself. It made it very difficult when we had administrative meetings, he was on central office team. But, I think I can, I can do this. Not a big deal, you know? And those who knew him, thought, he was an idiot.

Fionna believes female superintendents are more likely than male superintendents to directly be involved with personnel communications. She shared,

When you have the most difficult decisions, I'm talking about the most difficult in terms of human capital, human beings, not in terms of making a decision in the budget, not to build a building, but the decisions where it's going to impact in a very personal way, the lives of those people in you are in charge of. I think female superintendents probably own that responsibility more and do that communication more directly than men.

Fionna noted other people perceived and treated her differently because she was a female. She voiced,

I think my whole approach to the superintendency probably was a little bit different from most males because I was a woman. I knew that I would be perceived by some people differently. One of the things I learned very clearly was that emotion trumps logic slash data slash evidence everyday.”

Fionna remembered going on a job interview for a superintendent position and someone on the committee saying, “Well the question is, can this little lady, do this big job?” She remembered thinking this was blatant discrimination but keeping her composure and smiling through it. Fionna also remembered how she was treated differently because she was a female by some of her male colleagues during her first superintendency. She shared,

My first superintendency, the Director of Special Education, never calling me by my name or looking me in the eye, but referring to me as “that woman.” I'm sure he wouldn't have said something about that man.

Looking back on her career, Fiona credits the women who have come before her and notes that some women are “prevented from realizing their potential.” Fiona voiced,

I know that I've benefited from the work of many women who have come before me even though I was probably in the first wave of female superintendents. Maybe our work benefitted superintendents now, but clearly there have been women in other positions in the larger culture who have just made possible the fact that I was able to have been in a superintendency, a position of responsibility, as a female and have done well at. The other thing is, I've always been very careful. I consider myself a very strong feminist and I do believe that women, some women have been prevented from realizing their potential in their gifts by virtue of their gender.

Joanne shared that people were surprised at her “cut and dried” leadership approach and they assumed she was going to be “more motherly.” She shared,

For me, I think that being a female, when folks would come in, either board members, teachers, they would perceive a more motherly approach and were a little taken aback at the cut and dried, you know, ‘No, this is, this is what our policy says, this is what our rule is.’

Joanne remembered a time when being a female assisted her with being able to get more detailed information from the contractors on a building project. She shared, most males may not have wanted the contractors to know they did not understand what they were doing, and they might not have pressed the contractors the way she did. Joanne felt she needed to truly understand the details in order to then explain the work to her community stakeholders. She noted she was not embarrassed to take the position of learning, but a male may have been.

Joanne also remembered the time she brought the school board into cold classroom for board meetings, so they could experience the conditions first hand and she could prove to them the urgency for building improvements. Joanne shared her male counterparts reaction to this,

I think that (a female voice) made a difference, most especially with the building project, just because it's where my male counterpart just looked at me like I was crazy because he didn't see it. He didn't see how forcing, not forcing, but taking a board into an uncomfortable classroom climate would make a difference in their thinking. And my feeling was no, they had to experience that. And I don't know if that was just him or that was a male female thing, but I felt strongly they had to experience.

Joanne also commented on the feeling of loneliness she felt and wondered if male superintendents also brought those feeling of isolation home at night. She shared,

Superintendents are by themselves, you don't know what to share because you don't know who is going to use it against you. I don't think it's just women, I think men probably too. But, I do think men might not take it home as much. I think is our (females) maternal instinct though, we look, we want to fix things quicker, faster, and I don't know, the men I've seen think that same way. Because they (males) feel they can't ask the question or they just feel that everybody else should cater to them. I don't know what's going on in their minds, so, I hope maybe someday, a male will do the same study with male superintendents and that would be really interesting to see. That would be really interesting to see if they feel the same aloneness isolation that we (females) do.

Lisa shared her experiences with gender bias,

I think it definitely mattered I was a female and the reason I know is because so many people told me that. In the small school district, I was the first woman superintendent ever. At first people were concerned, they were like, I don't know if I could work with a female. I had a couple of principals tell me that people would approach them and say, "Well, how is it working for a female?" In the large school district, I was the second woman ever. I think there were a couple of board members who were very strong willed and thought they could push me around because I was a woman and they were shocked when they said, I think you should do this. And I would try to be democratic about it and say, well, let's think about this or let's talk about this. But sometimes they would get angry. The board chair thought he could just tell me what I needed to do and I would just do it. And when I didn't, he was a bully. He bullied. He yelled, he would embarrass me and I just never saw him act that way with a man. So I know it was different. And in fact, he made a comment, "Well, the only women that I have been around are my wife and my mother."

Lisa reflected upon, whether or not having a female voice impacted her superintendency, and shared,

Oh, I think it definitely mattered that I was a female and the reason I know that is because so many people told me that (laughter) So, in the small school district, I was the first woman superintendent ever. And, at first people were concerned, they were like, "I don't know if I could work with, with a female." Oh yeah. (laughter). I had a couple of principals tell me that people would approach them and say, "Well, how is it working for a female?" Because the opposite always been all males. So, there were a lot of

assumptions that it was just going to be different, that somehow, maybe they thought I was going to be rough and tough.

Lisa voiced how her school board thought she would simply follow their directions because she was a female. She shared,

Then in a large school district I was the second woman ever and the first woman had been 50 years earlier. (Laughter). I think I was perceived differently and of course there are 100 different perceptions from different people. I think there were a couple of board members who were very strong will that thought they could push me around because I was a woman and were shocked when they said, "I think you should do this." And I said, 'Well, let's think about this or let's talk about this' and I would try to be democratic about it. But sometimes they would get angry. The board chair, I think he thought he could just tell me what I needed to do and I would just do it.

Lisa shared, the board chair would get angry at her when she didn't do exactly what he wanted and voiced,

And when I didn't, he was a bully. He bullied. He yelled, he would embarrass me, and I just never saw him that way with a man. So, I know it was different. And in fact, when I first started he said he made a comment about, "Well, the only women that I really been around are my wife and my mother." And so, I just kind of made a joke out of it. I said, 'And now you've got me.' And he laughed.

Lisa shared,

The female voice probably made the situation more difficult. I was the second woman in the history of the district as superintendent and the first woman had been superintendent

the year I was born there. There was no memory, there was no board memory. With some board members there was definitely disrespect. They have a hard time with a woman who they saw as intelligent, who knew they couldn't push me around. And there were a couple of them when I was hired that felt like they could just tell me what to do and I would just do it and it, especially the men had a difficult time. So in that case, when I say I was like a speck in the ocean, it was almost like no matter what I said it wasn't going to help. And that was very disheartening almost to the point where I wondered if I should say something at all, because I knew I was going to make it worse. However, kids need a voice. And I, at that moment I had to be a voice so I had to take the chance.

Margaret remembered the time when someone stood up at a town meeting questioning why she was speaking on behalf of the school committee and district. She shared,

The first time I started to present the budget, someone in the town who had some position got up and said, “Why is she presenting the budget? Who does she think she is?” So, the school committee chair got up and said she's presenting it because the school committee asked her to.

Margaret voiced,

I think it made more of a difference in that people saw me as a woman. It didn't make any difference to me because I am who I am. I was conscious of being a woman because people made me conscious of being a woman.

Ruth also shared being a female influenced the way others treated her. She said,

I think I felt that gender problem much more in dealing with the board of selectmen and the finance chair, because it was so male dominated in terms of town politics. There had

been a male superintendent there for many, many years. He was much more laid back and was not as strong a leader as a lot of other male superintendents. So, it was interesting for me to try to set my image as a strong leader regardless of whether I was male or female and still keep my leadership style of being a positive person who listens and understands and tries to see all sides, but still strongly advocates for what I know needs to happen. I'm not sure that the board of selectmen really ever understood that and they tried to dominate me and tried to marginalize me at times.

Ruth remembered how the business manager treated her when she was advocating for her building to close because people were getting sick. She shared,

It certainly made a difference with the business manager who I don't feel had a good opinion of female administrators. He was somewhat of a chauvinist and yes, I do think that if it had been a male principal that he would have accepted the information much better than he did for me as a female. I think the superintendent at the time was male, but I think he was much more supportive, but the business manager and some of the school committee members really questioned my leadership as a female and my knowledge and ability to do what I did.

Ruth admitted this treatment impacted her self-confidence at times,

I questioned myself a lot and I questioned the type of leader that I was. It made me very insecure and at times unsure of myself that what I was doing was right, and how I was handling situations correctly. It really didn't help my confidence.

Sarah stated “It's more what you can do and what you're able to do in your knowledge base (not your gender).” She also expressed gratitude for being able to reach the superintendent role and shared,

I think being a female made a difference. I think in the first situation as the superintendent, I had the empathy factor or the families and the teachers. And I'm not saying that males do not have empathy. And maybe it (being a female superintendent) made a tiny crack in the ceiling... I think it shows the strength of women. It doesn't have to be a male to make things happen the right way to the correct conclusion or to stand by your principles. We (women) are not woosies, we are not.

Sarah also commented on how she noted the different levels of work ethics between male and female superintendents. She voiced,

I had that work ethic that you just do it. It doesn't matter how little. I remember one school board member said, that I need to see the big picture better, but, in small towns you are the only one there. You don't have an assistant. I had a special education director with 5,000 kids. And who do you think was going to be doing the work, it either didn't get done or you did it yourself. So, it isn't like you have a ton of people underneath you to do all the other stuff. So, it's interesting how people see it that way, but I wonder how people (males) play golf on Friday afternoons and people I know do, but I don't know he does the work, because the attention to detail does make a difference. So, I don't know how that can happen, but you know, we both know people that do that. I don't know any females that do that, but I certainly know males that do that or say I worked on Tuesday night and Thursday night so I am going home at noon. Really? Really? I don't know how

that happens. I always like to leave on Friday with a clean desk so it didn't have to bring anything home. So, I'd rather stay till five or six or seven, so that I could just leave with nothing that had to be done for Monday morning and then I could plan in my head and enjoying my family.

Three Overall Categories Depict How Female Superintendent's Use their Voices

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents and discover their individual perceptions of the development of their own voices as they faced critical moments as women performing the responsibilities associated with a position traditionally held by men and to discover how these women describe and make meaning of their own experiences during critical moments in their superintendency. For the purposes of this research, the term *critical moments* was defined as turning points and when female superintendents felt challenged in some way and needed to make a conscious decision about how to use their voice in order to be heard. The term *voice* was defined as a metaphor for the variety of ways in which women are silent, speak, listen, act, and develop their own concept of self (Gilligan, 1982). The definition of critical moments and voice were purposely broad and designed not to influence the direction of each participant's narrative story. The purpose of this study was to capture each participant's story and individual interpretation of how they used their voice, how they perceived themselves and believe others perceived them, and how they created meaning from their experiences.

This research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men. Seven retired female superintendents were asked

to engage in a process of self-reflection, by looking back at their past-selves, lived experiences and pre-existing photographs of themselves to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. The results of this study indicate female superintendents work diligently to advocate for themselves and others; they are courageous activists; and they reflective practitioners. Each of the eleven overall themes were analyzed and sorted into these three categories, which represent the actions, beliefs, and thoughts of retired female superintendents. Table 6, Overall Categories on How Female Superintendent Use their Voices, details a summary of how the eleven themes were narrowed down into the three categories and provides a summary of evidence collected from each participant’s story to support each of the three categories.

Table 6

Overall Categories on How Female Superintendents Use their Voices

Themes	Categories	Participant’s Evidence
<p>Theme 1- Positive Descriptions of Self</p> <p>Theme 2- Doing “What is Right” in the face of conflict/ critical moments</p> <p>Theme 3- Advocating for self and others</p>	<p>Category 1- Advocates for self and others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Theme 1 -Theme 2 -Theme 3 	<p>Annie- “I feel that I was an advocate for teachers and students, I was trying to be the voice of the school board in regards to balancing the budget and wellbeing of the school. My expertise is curriculum.”</p> <p>“I spoke passionately about kids and education and learning. That was part of why people trusted me to make the right decision.”</p> <p>Fionna- “I tend to make decisions based on principles. I try not to make decisions just reacting to the individual situation in front of me, but try to put that situation in larger context.”</p>

<p>Theme 4- A belief others perceived them as strong leaders</p>		<p>“I hope people would say that I have a highly developed moral compass.”</p>
<p>Theme 5- No regrets with use of voice</p>		<p>Joanne- “My focus is truly on children and the best education possible.”</p>
<p>Theme 6- Endearing memories</p>		<p>“I knew that it was the right thing to do (fire a coach) but I was also really hesitant and a little scared because I knew there was going to be pushed back. My big concern was that it was targeted at Me and not my principal or my teachers or the kids. I didn't want any of the evidence that I had collected to be public because they had to live in that town I didn't. So, I was in a protective mode knowing that I was probably not going to survive the war, but it still had to be done.”</p>
<p>Theme 7- Confidence in voice developed with experience</p>		<p>Lisa- “I would describe myself as curious. Try to be humble, innovative, caring, relationship builder.”</p>
<p>Theme 8- Ability to reflect on personal growth</p>		<p>“I'm proud of looking back and my voice was always about the kids.”</p>
<p>Theme 9- No planned career aspirations to become a superintendent</p>		<p>Margaret- “I saw myself in the superintendent's role as taking the district from where it was to a better place.” “I think I was diplomatic and circumspect.”</p>
<p>Theme 10- A voice of integrity guides female superintendents</p>		<p>Ruth- “I'm a strong believer in transformational leadership so that as a superintendent I see myself working to engage and support everyone in the district that we feel is effective and educationally sound.”</p>
<p>Theme 11- Female superintendents face gender bias</p>		<p>Sarah- “I had skills and bringing people together in a leadership team. I think I knew how to make a team. I think I knew how to get people to work together.”</p>

<p>Theme 1- Positive Descriptions of Self</p> <p>Theme 2- Doing “What is Right” in the face of conflict/ critical moments</p> <p>Theme 3- Advocating for self and others</p> <p>Theme 4- A belief others perceived them as strong leaders</p> <p>Theme 5- No regrets with use of voice</p> <p>Theme 6- Endearing memories</p> <p>Theme 7- Confidence in voice developed with experience</p> <p>Theme 8- Ability to reflect on personal growth</p> <p>Theme 9- No planned career aspirations to become a</p>	<p>Category 2- Courageous activists</p> <p>-Theme 4 -Theme 7 -Theme 8 -Theme 10</p>	<p>Annie- “I think others would have seen me as a good listener, yet able to make up my own decision, that I would act after knowing all sides all the extenuating circumstances.”</p> <p>“He (school board member) didn’t stop me, I continued to speak my mind and speak for what I thought was the benefit of the students or for what I legally had to do.”</p> <p>“After two years of 10-12 boys being the only ones in that classroom (readiness program), it was just wrong and we had to find another solution. Some people saw me as being very antagonistic and opinionated and belligerent, the people who were strongly in the readiness camp, but I was able to convince the school leadership that this was not a good program.”</p> <p>Fionna- “Since part of my approach was investing tons of time and effort into building relationships, and partnerships and connections, people saw me out there all the time and they probably said, even if I don't agree with her, she's working all the time, she's at every town meeting, she's at every celebration, she goes to funerals, she always listens to me and she always seems prepared.”</p> <p>“I told the school committee about person who was a felon and I remember one school committee member who was a supporter, wanted find a way to retain him. I nearly choked because I'm thinking this is a cut and dried. I was appalled that she felt that way. I've never told her that, but I was appalled and I was thinking, oh my God, this is breaking the law, you don't make exceptions and we don't have a choice but to let him go.”</p> <p>Joanne- “I think that when we look at having everyone feel good and no one accepting responsibility for their actions, be it parents, students, teachers, administrators, it’s just a big cog in the wheel and we don’t do our kids service. When people just say education is important, it</p>
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<p>superintendent</p> <p>Theme 10- A voice of integrity guides female superintendents</p> <p>Theme 11- Female superintendents face gender bias</p>	<p>should be important and that should be the focus not the extraneous garbage noise that comes with that.”</p> <p>“I think the first time when I had push back from teachers I was really stunned. I was surprised that educators didn’t put children first.”</p> <p>“I terminated some teachers, and put others on notice. The board supported me in that action and of course they (teachers) did go to the union, they did grieve it, but I had enough data to say, no, they weren't doing their job.”</p> <p>Lisa- “I was so angry. I was just incensed, I mean, how can you be a school board member sitting for the board and for your children and start micromanaging to the point where you’re going to say which books can be in front of children. So, I actually got up, excused myself and went into the hallway and my assistant superintendent came along with me and talked me down. That was a critical moment because I realized that I could speak up.”</p> <p>“I believe that being an administrator still means that you have to be a teacher at heart. So always trying to teach and coach people, but when I had to be, I can be very tough.”</p> <p>Margaret- “To me being a woman in the position when there were so few, was a significant piece of my contribution.”</p> <p>“I fired a high school principal. That is to say my boss fired him and then I was the one who had to do all of the hearings with the lawyers and the public to get him fired. Firing a high school principal is the hardest job the superintendent ever asked to do.”</p> <p>“I fired some teachers who were not doing a good job. I fired two high school principals. That's the hardest part I think of any leadership role is to say to someone what our president used to say on his TV show, so that's the</p>
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		<p>hardest part. Then the second hardest part I think is dealing with a strike. And I had that too. I only had one strike.”</p> <p>Ruth- “It was a real blow to the district (failed attempt for an override), we ended up having to make quite a few cuts in order to stay within the budget and they were not popular cuts, but we had no choice.”</p> <p>“I felt that as the superintendent, it was another time where you really have to be on top of everything and understand all groups and try to come up with a way for everyone’s voice to be heard.”</p> <p>Sarah- “I ended up firing a coach, it was that integrity piece and you have to do the right thing. This guy was doing things that were not right, not to the point of criminal but in the assault category.”</p> <p>“He was not renewed, It was a very tense meeting and at graduation some of the students walking across the stage would not shake my hand, but you have to do the right thing.”</p> <p>“I had to called this person who has more than 30 years experience into my office to non-renew her, and like every person she had her supporters.”</p>
<p>Theme 1- Positive Descriptions of Self</p> <p>Theme 2- Doing “What is Right” in the face of conflict/ critical moments</p> <p>Theme 3- Advocating for self and others</p>	<p>Category 3- Reflective practitioners -Theme 5 -Theme 6 -Theme 9 -Theme 11</p>	<p>Annie- “I was on top of things I was very current with what was going on in education and sharing that with other people. During my tenure as superintendent, we had one of our principals nominated as elementary principal of the year at a meeting with the Commissioner.”</p> <p>“I know the principal saw me kind of a hard nosed, he needed to step up to the situation as well, it couldn't just be the school district and that it had to be the school.</p> <p>“I think others just saw me as doing my role, you know, being factual and as compassionate as I could be.”</p> <p>“I'm an introvert, I'm not an extrovert and in this</p>

<p>Theme 4- A belief others perceived them as strong leaders</p>		<p>position, you have to be out there and so, if I'm going to be out there I'm going to make it where my comfort zone was and then you get more comfortable with public speaking and being in front of the public.”</p>
<p>Theme 5- No regrets with use of voice</p>		<p>Fionna- I learned that never, ever, ever again, let any kind of personal relationship interfere with the full force of the decision that you might have otherwise made.”</p>
<p>Theme 6- Endearing memories</p>		<p>“It wasn’t that it was difficult to maintain relationships. I’d say the quality of relationships shifted a bit (after becoming a superintendent). I think I had very good relationships with teachers, but not deep personal friendships.”</p>
<p>Theme 7- Confidence in voice developed with experience</p>		<p>“I have always had a very keen sense of self preservation. And I don't think that's inhibited my ability to do my work. I think it's sort of enhanced it because it's always do the right thing, do what is, do what is right, do what is defensible, do what the evidence supports.”</p>
<p>Theme 8- Ability to reflect on personal growth</p>		<p>“I think you have to know what you’re doing, otherwise you can change as a human being and it’s not healthy for you as a person. And I don’t think you can do things that are against your grain.”</p>
<p>Theme 9- No planned career aspirations to become a superintendent</p>		<p>Joanne- “I think that in hindsight I probably would have not been in such a rush to do everything immediately. I would have taken maybe a year or two and brought more folks along in the hopes that those stragglers would have voluntarily retired because it did create a bit of a riff in the school and the community because some of those folks were well liked.”</p>
<p>Theme 10- A voice of integrity guides female superintendents</p>		<p>“I wasn’t forgiving in those first few years. I wanted change and I wanted it now. In my head I was saying</p>
<p>Theme 11- Female superintendents face gender bias</p>		

these children deserve more.”

Lisa-

“Others saw me, as being very professional and tactful. I resolved the things that you're supposed to be as a superintendent even though I felt like it wasn't enough.”

“I use my voice in a very collaborative way because it wasn't just about me. It couldn't just be about my voice. It had to be very collaborative.”

“I think in the bigger sense that women tend to be very collaborative. And I think it did make a difference. The collaboration piece made a huge difference because that community really held that as a value. From the moment I stepped into that district, it was all about making sure that everybody's voice was heard.”

Margaret-

“I have a lot of, a retroactive confidence that I did a good job. So, whatever moments there were, they were not curriculum, not leadership, not the substance of the school district, but the times when politics get in the way as they do with things like school committees.”

“By and large, 90 percent of my interactions with people in the community, one to one, and in public were very positive. I know that I had enemies who doesn't who is in a position of authority.”

“I use my voice to keep things civilized, to prevent a blame game and to contribute to the production of a collaborative, positive, mutually beneficial outcome.”

“I did the right thing and that may sound prideful, but either you do the right thing or you don't. It's one or the other.”

Ruth-

“I really enjoyed the role of superintendent and being able to make an impact on the districts where I was.”

	<p>“I did a lot of listening to people and acknowledging their opinions and their thoughts, but then saying, well have you ever thought of doing it this way.”</p> <p>“I think there were times that I should have been stronger and taken on almost like a male role in terms of, you know, this is it. Although I did that at times, I think there were times that I could have been stronger doing that. I think I've grown as that type of a leader since I've left the superintendency.”</p> <p>“I think I didn't do anything differently than I normally would because I believe you have to be the person who you are. You can't create a persona that you think people want to see that isn't you. Because for me that doesn't work. And with my voice, I wanted them to see who I really was.”</p> <p>Sarah- “You can't do this your whole life during the day almost every waking hour and not have it spill into your private life.”</p> <p>“You have to be strong and think, I can do this and I have to do the right thing all the time.”</p> <p>“I cannot take the easy way out.”</p> <p>“I think integrity, you just have to have it. Because once you lose that, you're done.”</p>
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_____ **Category 1: Advocates for self and others.** The results indicate female superintendents speak positively about themselves (Theme 1); they work diligently to do “what is right” in the face of conflict/critical moments (Theme 2); and they use their voices to support and advocate for others (Theme 3). The words and phrases captured in the participant’s stories provide evidence to support this category: “I advocate for teachers and students” (Annie); “I tend to make decision based on principles”(Fionna); “My focus is truly on children and the best

education possible” (Joanne); “my voice was always about the kids” (Lisa); “I saw myself in the superintendent’s role as taking the district from where it was to a better place” (Margaret); “...I see myself working to engage and support everyone in the district that we feel is effective and educationally sound” (Ruth); and “I had skills and bringing people together in a leadership team. I think I knew how to make a team. I think I knew how to get people to work together” (Sarah).

Category 2: Courageous activists. The results indicate female superintendents are courageous activists. They believed others saw strong leaders (Theme 4) which provided them additional confidence to speak up and act on behalf of the students and staff they served; they admitted their own confidence levels developed through the varied experiences on the job (Theme 7); they noted they were able to look at their own actions to gauge their own personal growth (Theme 8); and they expressed a moral responsibility to care for the students and staff in their districts (Theme 10). The words and phrases captured in the participant’s stories provide evidence to support this category: “I would act after knowing all sides all the extenuating circumstances” (Annie); “He (school board member) didn’t stop me, I continued to speak my mind and speak for what I thought was the benefit of the students or for what I legally had to do” (Annie); “...my approach was investing tons of time and effort into building relationships... and they probably said, even if I don't agree with her, she's working all the time” (Fionna); “I told the school committee...you don’t make exceptions and we don’t have a choice but to let him go” (Fionna); “When people just say education is important, it should be important and that should be the focus not the extraneous garbage noise that comes with that”(Joanne); “I was so angry... how can you be a school board member ...start micromanaging to the point where you’re going to say which books can be in front of children... I realized that I could speak up” (Lisa); “Firing

a high school principal is the hardest job the superintendent ever asked to do” (Margaret); “...we ended up having to make quite a few cuts in order to stay within the budget and they were not popular cuts, but we had no choice” (Ruth); and “I ended up firing a coach, it was that integrity piece and you have to do the right thing” (Sarah).

Category 3: Reflective practitioners. The results indicate female superintendents are reflective practitioners. All participants expressed they were in important educational positions and their success was contingent upon their ability to be reflective on how their words and actions would be interpreted by others. All participants reported they had no regrets with the way they used their voices (Theme 5); they all noted they had endearing memories, even though they all faced many critical moments in their careers (Theme 6); none of the participants planned on becoming school superintendents but all were grateful for the experiences (Theme 9); and all participants repeatedly stressed they felt a moral obligation to do the right thing and protect the students and staff they served (Theme 10); and all participants reflected upon the uncomfortable reality of gender bias (Theme 11). The words and phrases captured in the participant’s stories provide evidence to support this category: “I’m an introvert, I’m not an extrovert ...and then you get more comfortable with public speaking and being in front of the public” (Annie); “I learned that never, ever, ever again, let any kind of personal relationship interfere with the full force of the decision that you might have otherwise made” (Fionna); “...it’s always do the right thing, do what is, do what is right, do what is defensible, do what the evidence supports” (Fionna); “I don’t think you can do things that are against your grain” (Fionna); “I think that in hindsight I probably would have not been in such a rush to do everything immediately” (Joanne); “I wasn’t forgiving in those first few years. I wanted change and I wanted it now. In my head I was saying these

children deserve more” (Joanne); “Others saw me, as being very professional and tactful. I resolved the things that you're supposed to be as a superintendent even though I felt like it wasn't enough” (Lisa); “It couldn't just be about my voice. It had to be very collaborative” (Lisa); “I have a lot of, a retroactive confidence that I did a good job” (Margaret); “I did the right thing and that may sound prideful, but either you do the right thing or you don't. It's one or the other” (Margaret); “I know that I had enemies who doesn't who is in a position of authority” (Margaret); “I think there were times that I should have been stronger and taken on almost like a male role in terms of, you know, this is it...”(Ruth); “...with my voice, I wanted them to see who I really was” (Ruth); “You have to be strong and think, I can do this and I have to do the right thing all the time” (Sarah); “I can not take the easy way out” (Sarah); and “I think integrity, you just have to have it. Because once you lose that, you're done” (Sarah).

Summary

Through the presentation of seven participant's individual stories and the eleven themes that emerged from their stories, the data indicates female superintendents are advocates for themselves and others, courageous activists and reflective practitioners. These female superintendents used their voices to take action and engage in experiences to better understand and advocate for themselves and others. The data indicates female superintendents are reflective practitioners who listen to their internal voices and act in ways that align to their moral beliefs regarding “what is the right thing” to do on behalf of the students and staff they serve.

Discussion

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the stories of seven retired female superintendents and discover how retired female superintendents described how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. Participants were asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves and lived experiences and share stories regarding how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. This research had two main objectives: to hear the voices of retired female superintendents and to create an opportunity for women to share their perspectives of their experiences in a role traditionally held by men.

This chapter will discuss the three overall categories that explain how female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers in relationship to the Literature Review. This chapter will also discuss how the results from this study can contribute to the limited body of research on female superintendents and how these results can lead to future research on the female superintendent's voice. An examination of the limitations of this study will be provided, along with a conclusion summarizing the salient points learned through a narrative qualitative study on the voices of seven retired female superintendents.

Summary

The results of this study are significant because there are no research studies examining the retired female superintendent's perspective of her own story through the lens of how she described using her voice during the critical moments in her career. This study provided a unique opportunity to empower retired female superintendents to share their stories and take a closer look at the culture within the phenomenon of being a female superintendent. The rationale for

studying female superintendents' perceptions of the development and use of their own voice was connected to the fact women are only represented in 23% of all superintendent seats nationwide (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012) and there is a societal belief that women have a hard time seeing themselves as leaders (Duerst-Lahti, 2010). The results of this study contradict the following previous research studies:

- Women are not prepared to address inequalities or biases within their organizations (Niesche, 2017).
- Women have a difficult time viewing themselves as leaders (Duerst-Lahti, 2010).
- Women prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982).
- Female leaders who demonstrate caring and collaborative personality traits are viewed as weak and ineffective (Young & Skria, 2003).
- Women have difficulty expressing themselves in public, so others will listen (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997).
- Female superintendents acknowledge no gender barriers existed in attaining their superintendent position (Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, and Silvernail, 2005).

The results of this study support previous research studies claiming:

- Women are criticized by males and treated differently (Blount, 1998).
- Women rely on interconnectedness and interpersonal skills to be successful in their roles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).
- Female superintendents have stronger feelings than their male counterparts about gender biases that exist (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001).

Three Overall Categories Depict How Female Superintendents Use their Voices

Category 1: Advocates for self and others. Through the narrative stories of seven female retired female superintendents the descriptive data noted in Themes 1, 2, and 3, demonstrate that female superintendents are strong advocates for themselves and others and are not afraid to “do the right” thing.

Theme 1: Positive Descriptions of Self. All seven participants provided positive descriptors of themselves when asked to describe themselves as female superintendents. Contrary to Duerst- Lahti’s (2010) research claiming women have a hard time seeing themselves as leaders, the results of this study indicate female superintendents had no issues with describing themselves as strong and caring leaders. Participants used the following words to describe their individual leadership characteristics as female superintendents: “caring,” “dependable,” “good listener” “honest,” “committed,” “tough,” “principled,” “ethical,” “morally responsible,” and “hardworking.” Participants shared a common internal determination to prove to themselves and others they could perform successfully as female superintendents. Participants did not have any apprehension in discussing their attributes as “caring” and “collaborative” leaders, which also contradicts Young and Skria’s (2003) research, claiming female leaders who demonstrate caring and collaborative personality traits are viewed as weak and ineffective leaders.

This research study also contradicts Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule’s research (1997) claiming “women have difficulty gaining the respect of others for their minds and their ideas,” “women have more difficulty than men asserting their authority” and “women have difficulty in expressing themselves in public” (p. 5). None of the seven female superintendents reported they had any issues expressing themselves in public or gaining the respect of others. All

seven participants reported their predecessors were males and none of the participants expressed having difficulty asserting their authority or expressing their ideas as a female leader. Annie described her actions as someone who was “very current with what was going on in education” and very capable of presenting to others. Fionna referenced her sense of “self-preservation” and “moral compass” as her internal forces that enabled her to always “do what is defensible.” Joanne admitted politics frustrated her but she never let it get in her way of speaking her mind or sharing her ideas about what was in the best interest of the children. Lisa described her actions as the first female superintendent in two districts, as someone who was always working “towards high integrity.” Margaret noted she “never had a problem being put on the spot” and was always ready to respond. Ruth discussed how her “collaborative leadership style” helped others see her thought process and understand how she came to a decisions; and Sarah described herself as “approachable” and expressed she always “felt respected.”

Theme 2: Doing “What is Right” in the Face of Conflict/Critical Moments. Participants shared a common belief that it was their responsibility to “do the right thing” regardless of the costs. Participants detailed various types of critical moments that involved dealing with resistance from staff, school boards, school committees, colleagues, and/ or community members, and all participants expressed a moral obligation to “do the right thing” on behalf of the students, staff and community they served. Annie “continued to speak her mind and do what she legally had to do” even though an irate school board member was mad at her for complying with the “Right to Know” laws and continued to challenge her. Fionna had the “courage of her convictions to speak the truth” in the first year of her superintendency when she had to make the difficult decision to re-organize the central office administrative staff. Joanne did the right thing

and fired a beloved football coach who engaged in inappropriate behaviors even though the decision prompted her to resign because the majority of the community wanted her to ignore the facts. Lisa used her voice to advocate for culturally diverse books for her students even when a school board member publically and repeatedly opposed her decision. Margaret made the difficult decision to look for another job when two community members were actively trying to get rid of her. Ruth's "moral responsibility" to help others aided her when she "bucked the School Committee" and advocated for closing a building because of air quality concerns; and Sarah had the courage to fire an ineffective Assistant Principal who had been moved from building to building in her district, and as a result of doing the right thing, she then faced an unfounded discrimination lawsuit.

Duerst- Lahti's (2010) research claims, "leadership is culturally gendered toward the masculine so women tend to have a harder time both seeing themselves as a leader and in being seen as a leader" (O'Connor, 2010, p. 23) and the U. S. Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as "... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004; Björk, 2000, p. 8). The results of this study indicate female superintendents are strong leaders who can make difficult decisions and advocate very well for themselves and others. Three of the seven participants were the first female superintendents in their districts (Lisa, Margaret, and Fionna) and all seven participants replaced male superintendents. Participants repeated phrases such as, "service to the profession," "doing the right thing," "focus on children," "transformational leadership," and "servant leadership." Each participant described herself as a strong female leader who felt compelled to "do the right thing" even when that meant facing public resistance and conflict head on. The

various types of critical moments faced by the participants are noted in Figure 8, Summary of Critical Moments by Participants.

Figure 8: Summary of Critical Moments by Participants

Annie	Fionna	Joanne	Lisa	Margaret	Ruth	Sarah
School Board conflict for complying with the laws	Invasion of privacy: Finding someone in her office going through her desk	Resistance from teachers to update curriculum and instructional practices	Student Shooting in school	Dealing with hearings and the aftermath of a fired principal	Moving into Interim positions mid-year and replacing fired Superintendents	The arrest of a staff member involving child pornography
Ending Readiness Programs that were not effective	Budgetary Reorganization in Central Office and firing Administrators	Firing a beloved Football Coach	School Board conflict regarding their racial bias' against students	Teachers' Strike	Advocating to close a school due to serious air quality issues	Firing an African American Assistant principal and facing a discrimination Lawsuit
Bullying situations involving hearings	Firing a Teacher who falsified credentials	Advocating for a building project	Being the first Female Superintendent	Advocating for Technology in Education	The arrest of an ex-employee involving abuse of minors	Firing a beloved Coach

Theme 3: Advocating for Self and Others. Gilligan’s (1982) research notes women have difficulty listening to their inner voices and often choose to be silent because they prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions. This study contradicts Gilligan’s research (1982), as all seven female superintendents recalled critical moments when they used their voices to advocate for themselves and others. Contrary to Gilligan’s (1982) research, each participant discussed a time when they lost relationships with others because “doing the right” thing required them to speak up. For example, when Annie had the data that showed the early readiness program was not effective and discriminatory, she advocated to

change it and faced strong opposition from many of her fellow administrators and staff. When Fionna realized the organizational structure of central office was not cost effective and some administrators were not doing their jobs, she took the steps to change the structure and fired ineffective administrators, fully knowing her relationships with them would be strained. When Joanne recognized teachers were not working towards curriculum improvement in a low performing district, she fired some teachers and put everyone on notice, fully understanding there would be push back. Other participants shared critical moments where their advocacy assisted others. For example, when Lisa experienced a near tragedy when a student shot himself in one of her schools, she became a promoter of school safety across her state. When Margaret recognized the importance of getting technology into the classrooms, she worked with Apple and legislators. When Ruth had an ex-employee arrested for child abuse, she worked hard to protect the privacy of her students and kept the press from attending a forum for parents. When Sarah faced a natural disaster and her schools were shut down for weeks, she led the emergency response teams in her community and opened up the schools as shelters.

While history has created many societal structures and barriers that keep women in a particular place where their voices are expected to remain silent and passive (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Blount, 1998), this study reveals that female superintendents are not silent or passive and they use their voices to speak up on behalf of themselves and others. All participants shared how they had to repeatedly examine their own core beliefs and make conscious decisions to continue to advocate for what was “right” in their minds, even when they knew they would face ongoing oppositional forces and personal attacks. Niesche (2017) points out most leaders are not prepared for addressing the inequality and status

quo within their school organizations because they are more concerned with processes than discovering their individual purpose, and this study also contradicts these findings. While “working women are painfully aware men succeed better than they in getting and holding the attention of others for ideas and opinions,” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 5), the women in this study did not “worry that if they were to develop their own powers it would be at the expense of others” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 46).

Category 2: Courageous Activists. Through the narrative stories of seven female retired female superintendents the descriptive data noted in Themes 4, 7, 8, 10, demonstrate that female superintendents are courageous activists who are not afraid to use their voices to advocate for themselves and others.

Theme 4: A Belief Others Perceive Them as Strong Leaders. Participants were asked to describe how they thought others saw them during critical moments in their careers and all seven retired female superintendents believed others saw them as strong leaders. Words like, “tough,” “hard-nosed,” “pushy,” “compassionate,” “advocate,” “principled,” “organized,” “professional,” “strong,” “courageous,” and “approachable” were used as descriptors of strong leadership. Eagly & Karau’s (2002) research notes society expects men to lead and women to follow, and claims females face prejudice when they show characteristics associated to the male gender. The results of this study support Eagly & Karau’s research in that all the participants shared situations where they were expected to follow, and when they did not follow, when they acted strong like a male, they faced ill treatment and prejudice. For example, Annie was expected to listen to her school board member and ignore the laws, and when she did not the board member bullied her. Fiona was expected to ignore the teacher who falsified his credentials for years, and when she did not a

school board member voiced opposition to her decision. Joanne was expected to ignore ineffective teachers and the inappropriate coach, and when she did not she lost community support. Lisa was expected to listen the school board member who was a racist, and when she did not he treated her badly. Margaret was expected not to march with the teachers on strike, and when she did not the attorney questioned her. Ruth was expected to be silent when staff were getting sick in her building, and when she did not her school committee was angered. Sarah was expected to give her Assistant Principal a glowing evaluation as everyone else did, and when she did not she was wrongfully accused of discrimination because he was African-American.

The participants' stories demonstrate female superintendents possess the courage to act, the courage to speak, and the courage to commit to "doing the right thing." As a result of being courageous activists, participants believed others saw them as strong and competent leaders. Annie believed other people saw her as a "good listener," "compassionate," and "factual"; Fionna believed other people saw her as "a principled person" with a "highly developed moral compass"; Joanne believed other people saw her as "tough," "definitive," and "organized"; Lisa believed other people saw "very professional and tactful"; Margaret believed other people saw her as "a pushy Jewish woman"; Ruth believed other people saw her as "good listener," and "strong and in control"; and Sarah believed other people saw her as "a strong superintendent with empathy."

Research informs us that female leaders will take on more male characteristics in order to succeed, and they are often criticized and negatively labeled as dragon lady, battle-ax or Attila the Hun (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Weinraub 1997; Genovese 1993; Tannen 1994). Only three participants shared the negative labels that others had given them: Margaret believed others saw

her as “a pushy Jewish woman”; Fionna referenced being called “Ice Queen”; and Annie believed her principal saw her as a “hard-nosed.”

Theme 7: Confidence in Voice Developed with Experience. Participants were asked to describe the trajectory of their voices over their careers and all participants reported their confidence and courage developed over time and through the varied experiences they had. Research informs us “working women are painfully aware men succeed better than they in getting and holding the attention of others for ideas and opinions,” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 5), and “women worry that if they were to develop their own powers it would be at the expense of others” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 46). The results of this study indicates otherwise; none of the seven retired female superintendents reported they had a difficult time “getting and holding the attention of others” nor did they express any concern that the use of their voice would be at the expense of others. Quite the contrary, all participants expressed they had the courage to use their voices to purposefully help, advocate, protect and/ or advance others.

All participants said they were confident in their abilities to lead and all noted how their confidence and courage grew stronger through the varied critical moments they experienced. Annie said even though her “voice was more pronounced at the end of my career,” she always knew what she stood for. Fionna learned to “modulate her voice” and actions depending upon the situation and although she believed her “voice was pretty consistent and strong” across her entire career, she became more confident in her abilities with each of her administrative roles. Joanne reported she was “a little shy, a little reticent” at first but as she got older, she was able to refocus everything on whether or not it “was good for our children” and her voice became very “tough”

and “strong.” Lisa reported that her voice became more knowledgeable with her experiences and by learning more about the communities she served, she was able to be more specific with her voice. Margaret believed her “voice was pretty evenly distributed” across her career, and noted as her experiences grew she recognized the importance of being aware of the political landscape before speaking. Ruth said her voice was always authentic, but it was “more pronounced” in the later years of her career as she became more comfortable in the superintendent role. Sarah described herself as “talker” and reported her voice was always strong. Sarah also noted, not only did her confidence grow with her experiences, but so did her level of worrying, because with experience you also become more aware about the potential outcomes and what can go wrong.

Theme 8: Ability to Reflect on Personal Growth. All seven participants had the courage to participate in a self-reflective study that required them to share the stories related to critical moments in their careers and reflect on their vulnerable thoughts about their own personal growth. Looking back at their former selves, each participant courageously shared their perspectives on their past lives as female superintendents. Participants were asked whether they would change anything about the way they used their voices looking back at their critical moments and five of the seven participants were specific in their responses to this question. Annie reported she entered the assistant superintendent role (the first time) before she was truly ready to do the job. Annie admitted she was “lucky” to return to a principal position where she stayed for many years before moving back up to central office and eventually into a co-leading superintendent role. Annie demonstrated courage when she made a conscious decision to return to a principal position and she shared, “I was not as effective as I could have been,” as an

assistant superintendent. Fionna courageously admitted, “I learned to modulate my voice in order to be effective” and she did not consider this to be “fake” approach but one that enabled her to learn more about the situation and stakeholder’s needs, so she could put together an effective strategy to resolve the issue at hand. Joanne courageously shared her own vulnerability when she shared her loneliness as a superintendent and when she wished she had a bit more “patience” with teachers. Joanne voiced, if she had the chance to do it again, she would provide more training to teachers, rather than simply expecting them to know things. Lisa demonstrated courage when she outwardly reflected upon her gender and shared she now often wonders whether she would have been heard differently if she “lost her cool” once in a while. Lisa expressed, people interpret a woman differently than a man when she loses her cool and this supports Eagly & Karau’s (2002) research claiming, female leaders are scrutinized in very different ways than male leaders. Ruth shared she wished she had entered the superintendency sooner than she did and admitted she “never saw myself as someone who could be a good effective superintendent” because her inner voice held her back. Ruth’s statement supports Gilligan’s (1982) research claiming women have difficulty listening to their inner voices.

___ Rosenthal’s (2002) and Eagly & Karau’s (2002) research points out that women face different types of challenges in the workplace and are often put into lesser positions simply because of their gender. Duerst-Lahti’s (2010) research claims women have to pass through organizational “gatekeepers” before reaching the superintendency. The results of this study support the research of Rosenthal (2002), Eagly & Karau (2002) and Duerst-Lahti (2010) because all participants shared specific critical moments when they were treated differently because of their gender. Participants shared stories regarding their move up into the

superintendent role and many noted particular struggles they faced passing through organizational “gatekeepers.” For example, Annie recalled how the concept of the co-superintendent position was first rejected by her school board and then reconsidered only after they hired a male who could not do the job alone. Fionna shared a time when she did not get a position because of her gender and she vividly remembers a man asking her “Can this little lady do the job?” Lisa recalled the multiple challenges she faced as the first ever female superintendent for a very large district, “At first people were concerned, they were like, I don’t know if I could work with a female. A couple principals told me people would approach them and say, how is it working for a female?” Interestingly, all participants shared a common belief that situational “lucky” played some role in their ability to move into a superintendent role.

All seven participants disclosed they were obligated to “do the right thing” for the students they served and they struggled at times with finding the balance of taking care of themselves and their families. The participants’ diverse stories Brunner’s (2012) research where he noted, “women administrators have two battles – the first as a warrior for children, but the second as a warrior for themselves” (Brunner, 2012, p. x). For example, Sarah recalled the time when she left her ill husband home alone during a natural disaster so she could manage the emergency shelter at the schools for her community. Ruth recalled the time when she missed helping her daughter prepare for a prom because she had to attend a school committee meeting to advocate for closing her school to protect the health of her students and staff. Fionna admitted she always had a strong sense of “self-preservation” and she never lost sight of her protecting herself or her family as a single mother. Joanne recalled the intense loneliness she felt whenever she made the difficult decisions to raise the standards of teaching in her low performing district.

Lisa recalled the feeling like a “spec in the ocean” when she faced racism from a school board member.

Theme 10: Female Superintendents Face Gender Bias. Participants were asked to reflect upon and share critical moments from their lived experiences as female superintendents and whether or not they felt a female voice made or did not make a difference in the work they were doing. Participants were not specifically asked about gender bias, yet each participant shared different times in their careers when they were judged merely on their gender. The results from this study indicate gender bias exists for female superintendents, in both overt and covert ways. All participants shared their experiences and all demonstrated courage when experiencing gender bias on the job. Annie recalled the time the male school board chair held a long lasting grudge against her for complying with the “Right to Know” laws and shared, “I think the fact that I was a female gave him, I guess a license to be critical.” Annie admitted she ended up eventually retiring because of the conflict with this school board chair, because he refused to “let up.” Fiona shared several times in her career when she was challenged because of her gender: the time she found a male director in her office going through her desk one early morning; the time she was asked, “Can this little lady do this big job?”; and the times her Director of Special Education would never look her in the eye and referred to her as “that woman.” Joanne remembered when her “male counterpart just looked at me like I was crazy” because he did not understand why she held school board meetings in classrooms to show the board the heat was not working.

Lisa shared,

I think it definitely mattered I was a female and the reason I know is because so many people told me that. In the small school district, I was the first woman superintendent ever. At first people were concerned, they were like, I don't know if I could work with a female. I had a couple of principals tell me that people would approach them and say, "Well, how is it working for a female?" In the large school district, I was the second woman ever. I think there were a couple of board members who were very strong willed and thought they could push me around because I was a woman and they were shocked when they said, I think you should do this. And I would try to be democratic about it and say, well, let's think about this or let's talk about this. But sometimes they would get angry. The board chair thought he could just tell me what I needed to do and I would just do it. And when I didn't, he was a bully. He bullied. He yelled, he would embarrass me and I just never saw him act that way with a man. So I know it was different. And in fact, he made a comment, "Well, the only women that I really been around are my wife and my mother."

Margaret expressed she never experienced any type of outward harassment, but she was perceived as a "pushy Jewish woman." She remembered the first time presenting the budget and having someone get up and say, "Who does she think she is?" Ruth admitted, she "felt a gender problem much more in dealing with the board of selectmen and finance chair," and with the business manager who she felt did not have a "good opinion of female administrators." Sarah remembered the time when she was going to present information on how she handled the natural disaster in her community to a group of superintendents and a male colleague acted "shocked" that she was the superintendent and able to accomplish what she did during the natural disaster

as a female. Sarah smiled when she reflected upon her accomplishments and stated, “If nothing else, you can do more than make cookies when you’re a girl!”

Eagly and Karau’s (2002) research claimed prejudice develops more readily toward female executive leaders because there is often a discrepancy between what the assumed gender role behavior should be with the actual personality traits and leadership characteristics of the female leader. This study supports Eagly and Karau’s (2002) findings regarding prejudice against women, as each participant reflected upon how they were made aware of their gender by others and faced different challenges than their male counterparts. Participant’s stories regarding gender bias also support the results of the General Social Survey (GSS) data that consistently reports that Americans prefer to have male leaders especially in political roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Annie had to deal with her school board chair’s incessant anger when she did not listen to him and she followed the “Right to Know” laws. Fionna had to deal with a male director who violated her personal office space by going through her desk and when she confronted him he acted like it was his prerogative and he did nothing wrong. Lisa had to deal with her school board chair bullying her, embarrassing her and yelling at her when she did not agree with him. Karau’s research (2002) claims female leaders are scrutinized in very different ways than male leaders and this research study supports these findings.

Category 3: Reflective Practitioners. Through the narrative stories of seven female retired female superintendents the descriptive data noted in Themes 5, 6, 9, 11, demonstrate that female superintendents are reflective practitioners who are not afraid to use their voices to advocate for themselves and others and share their perspectives about their personal growth and thought processes.

Theme 5: No Regrets with Use of Voice. All seven retired female superintendents reported they were very satisfied and had no regrets with the ways in which they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. Annie reported, she “did speak out” and was “pretty passionate” about her beliefs and actions. Fionna reported, “I spoke my mind.” Joanne reported being “tough” when she needed to be. Lisa reported, “being proud of looking back and seeing my voice was always about the kids.” Margaret reported, she had no regrets and “told it like it was.” Ruth reported she had no regrets, but wished she had “been stronger and taken on almost like a male role.” Sarah had no regrets and felt “blessed” to have become a school superintendent. These findings also contradict the research that informs us “women have more difficulty than men asserting their authority or considering themselves as authorities”; “women have difficulty in expressing themselves in public so that others will listen”; and “women have difficulty gaining the respect of others for their minds and their ideas” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 5). All seven retired female superintendents looked back on their careers with pride and with no regrets.

Theme 6: Endearing Memories. All seven participants engaged in a process of self-reflection as they looked back on their careers as female superintendents and shared stories related to how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. As noted in the narrative stories of each participant and in the discussions of Theme 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, all the participants shared memories that involved both positive and negative challenges they faced as female superintendents. Participants were asked to share and reflect upon pre-existing work-related photographs to assist with the self-reflection process of this study. Four participants shared photographs at their last interview and openly discussed what they were feeling at the

time of the photograph as well as their current day thoughts regarding their own growth as a leaders and individuals.

Annie shared various pictures of working with her administrative team and school events and noted that things were not always perfect, but through teamwork and collaboration, her job as a female superintendent was very rewarding. Annie pointed out how important it was to enjoy the people she worked with and how that made getting the job done easier and more pleasant. Lisa shared her newsletters, which she claimed helped her get the school board and public to notice the successful accomplishments of the diverse student population. Lisa smiled and laughed when she shared the picture of herself buried by a very large stack of culturally diverse books that she received upon her retirement and then donated to the schools; this her creative way to get back at the school board member who tried to block the purchasing of culturally diverse books. Ruth shared pictures from her past and was struck by how truly important it was for her to be in the schools and in the classrooms, regardless of the role she was in. Ruth claimed being visible in the schools helped her the three times she replaced a superintendent who was asked to leave. Ruth proudly described how being in the schools, along with being a good listener and collaborative leader, helped her lead three different districts through difficult leadership transitions. Sarah shared photographs of when she was recognized as the Superintendent of the Year and described her gratitude in detail. Sarah remembered being recognized at a national conference shortly after her husband passed away and even though this was a very difficult personal time, Sarah reported she was able to get through this time with some very positive memories because she had the tremendous support from her children and the entire school community she worked for.

Theme 9: No Planned Career Aspirations to Become a Superintendent. Participants shared their stories on how they became superintendents and the majority of them admitted they had no planned career aspirations to become a superintendent. The 2012 U.S. Department of Education report calculated there were 23% females and 77% males in superintendent roles nationwide, showing only a 20% increase in the number of female superintendents since the 1970's. Brunner (2012) claims, "the struggle for legitimacy and equity has consumed an entire century and, while taking women many places, it has not increased their representation in the superintendency" (p. xii). With less than a quarter of females in the superintendent role nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012) this study supports the position that females do not set out long-term plans to move into the superintendent position for one reason or another. Kawaguchi (2014) research on the barriers women face while seeking and serving in the position of superintendent revealed 46 % of her participants claimed the number one barrier was the discrimination they felt coming from the "Good Old Boys' Network." Glass's (2001) research also provides a number of reasons women do not actively seek the superintendent position. Glass studied 297 female superintendents and the discovered the following beliefs: women lack credentials; women are not in the right positions to make the move; women are not good business managers; women have families to take care of; women are not viewed as viable candidates by school boards/ school committees; women are more focused on teaching than administration; women spend more time in the classroom leaving them less time to move up the administration ladder. While none of these reasons were revealed by the participants in this study, it is evident more research needs to be conducted to learn why more women are not aiming to become superintendents.

While the participants in this study did not go into specific details on why they did not purposefully aim for the superintendent role, they all noted “situational luck” played a role in their move into the role and they expressed complete confidence in their abilities to do the job. Annie explained her move to the co-superintendent role was situational; she and another assistant superintendent created the idea after watching several superintendents have challenges with leading five different districts and at first it was denied. Fionna shared,

I would describe myself as a superintendent who came to the position not having planned it for two decades before or three decades before it. I had envisioned myself as a classroom teacher. . . . I moved into the superintendency probably in a manner that's fairly nontraditional. I was just lucky, you know, I was just unbelievably lucky.

Joanne shared, she applied for her first superintendent position only because her supervisor encouraged her to do so; “I had been a high school principal and an elementary principal and my superintendent at the time said, I really think you need to move up, you need to take more control, more challenges.” Ruth admitted, “I never intended to be a superintendent. I never really aspired to be a superintendent. I was the Assistant Superintendent and asked to take over for a superintendent who was asked to leave.” Sarah stated,

It wasn't like when I was 18, I said I want to be a superintendent, that is not at all the way it happened. It was by accident, I started as a second grade teacher and moved up to special education positions, principal positions and central office positions.

Demographic Data

While this study did not focus on the pay scale of female superintendents, it is interesting to note there was a question on the demographic study that asked if female superintendents replaced a male or female superintendent and whether they received a higher or lower salary than

their predecessor.

As noted in Table 7, Demographic Data Related to Gender, Pay Scale and Predecessor, seven female superintendents at one time or another in their careers replaced 10 male superintendents and only three female superintendents replaced three female superintendents in their careers.

This data supports the fact that males dominate the superintendent position; “The U. S. Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as "... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004; Björk, 2000, p. 8). The demographic survey also revealed five out of seven female superintendents received a higher salary than their predecessors and only two received less money, and one noted she had less responsibilities.

Table 7

Demographic Data Related to Gender, Pay Scale and Predecessor

Pseudonym	Position held before becoming a Superintendent	Predecessor Male or Female	Did you receive a higher or lower salary than your predecessor	Currently Working in the Field of Education
Fionna	Vice President College	Males	Higher	No
Annie	Assist. Superintendent	Male	Lower with less duties	Yes
Lisa	Executive Director of Curriculum & Instruction	Males	Higher	No
Sarah	Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Ed. And Special Services	1 Male/ 1 Female	Higher	No
Joanne	Principal	3 Males/ 1 Female	Higher	Yes
Margaret	Assistant Superintendent	Males	Higher	Yes

Ruth	Assistant Superintendent	2 Males / 1 Female	Lower	Yes
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There is contradictory data on the pay scale for female superintendents in comparison to their male counterparts. Long referenced a study the 2006 Educational Research Service study that revealed women superintendent made approximately \$9,000 more a year than their male counterparts (Long, 2010, p. 33; Hollingworth, 2006). Contradicting Long's research, Meir and Wilkins (2002) conducted a study of over 4000 superintendents and discovered females are paid approximately 5.5% less than men and receive 2% less than men for obtaining their doctorate (Kawaguchi, 2014, p. 14). The results from this study indicate five of the participants made more money than their predecessors; yet it needs to be noted the benefits packages and details were not explored.

Implications for Future Research

The implications for future research from this study are broad because the phenomenon of being a female superintendent has not been widely explored. With women filling only 23% of all superintendent seats nationwide (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012), this narrative qualitative self-reflection study is merely a small start in understanding the perspectives and experiences of female superintendents. The overall results of this research study indicates retired female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers to advocate for themselves, acted as courageous activists and reflective practitioners. This study supports that retired female superintendents have positive self-perceptions of themselves; they stood up to do "the right thing" even when faced with conflict; they correlated their experiences with developing more confidence in their voice; they are reflective thinkers; they believed others saw them as strong leaders; and they admitted they faced gender bias. Other suggested research

studies could include surveying a much larger base of female superintendents to learn more about their perspectives about how they are performing the job; what skills they believe are necessary; what type of trainings they recommend for aspiring female leaders; what types of challenges they face; and what recommendations they have to encourage more females to enter this position.

“The U. S. Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as "... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004; Björk, 2000, p. 8). It remains evident we do not have enough research to fully understand why more females are not finding success at reaching the superintendent role. One may assume females are simply not interested in the position, as Glass (2001) has implied through his research, but the findings from this research indicate female superintendents feel “lucky” to have been appointed superintendents and they have found this job to be both personally and professionally rewarding. Although, Glass’s study (2001) indicated a number of reasons why women do not reach the superintendent position (women lack credentials; women are not in the right positions to make the move; women are not good business managers; women have families to take care of; women are not viewed as viable candidates by school boards/ school committees; women are more focused on teaching than administration; women spend more time in the classroom leaving them less time to move up the administration ladder), the participants in this study did not validate these reasons when they described their move to the superintendent role or shared their varied experiences. Since a majority of the participants in this study reference “situational luck” as a factor, another recommended future study could be to learn more about how female superintendents describe the “skills and factors” that got them hired in comparison to the “situational luck” that was referenced in this study.

To expand upon these research findings, I would recommend replicating this study with a group of male and female superintendents and do a comparison study to learn whether there are similarities or differences in the ways in which male and female superintendents express their stories and perceived ways in which they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. Building off of the concepts exposed in this study, a future study involving the perspectives of the hiring boards for superintendents, would provide useful information to aspiring female educational leaders on what skills are needed to pass through the hiring “gatekeepers.” School committees/school boards could be surveyed, after they made the decisions to hire a male instead of a female, to collect information to better understand how they made their decision and if gender mattered. This type of research would be extremely helpful with understanding why the historical pattern of hiring males for the superintendent role continues. A study examining hiring practices for superintendents could be another way to challenge the assumption that “leadership is culturally gendered toward the masculine” (Duerst-Lahti’s, 2010; O’Connor, 2010, p. 23).

The findings from this research inform us there is still much to learn about the female superintendent’s experiences. Brunner and Grogan (2007), Duerst-Lahti (2014), and Kawaguchi (2014) recommend female leaders be given more supports and training to better understand the political and social challenges they will face because of their gender. In order for us to properly prepare aspiring female educational leaders the following list are suggested topics for future research from the female superintendent’s perspective:

- What specific types of training would you recommend for aspiring female educational leaders who want to become successful superintendents?

- What strategies and skills do you believe are essential for female superintendents to have in order to be successful in this role?
- What advice would you give to an aspiring female educator considering the superintendent position?
- What social or political challenges do you face because of your gender as a female superintendent?

The information gathered from seven retired female superintendent's stories and perspectives on how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers has the potential to contribute to the research on gender equity in public education, and provide meaningful information to current superintendents, aspiring female leaders, School Boards, Departments of Education, and colleges and leadership preparation programs.

Limitations of the Research

This study is limited to the narrative stories of seven retired female superintendents and their exploration of their perspectives on the development of their own voices during critical moments in their careers. A limitation could be noted with the small size of participants and their racial demographics; six reported they were white and one reported they were "human." Another limitation could be noted with the methodology chosen; a narrative qualitative inquiry focused on learning more about the multiple realities of how seven retired female superintendents explain to themselves and others how they used their voices during critical moments in their careers. While qualitative narrative research focuses on the listening and re-listening to the oral histories and recollections of participants, another limitation could be noted in the amount of time the researcher has to spend with participants to gather their stories, to accurately analyze, and then retell their stories. The quality and quantity of the data collected was based solely on

participants' willingness to share specifics about their lives as female superintendents. Although the seven participants shared a wide variety of experiences, including both positive and negative, some may see the open-ended interview protocols associated with a qualitative narrative study as a limitation. Finally, another limitation is these results are limited to the small population researched and cannot be generalized to the larger population of female superintendents without doing more research on the how female superintendents use their voices during critical moments in their careers.

Summary

The rationale for studying female superintendents' perceptions of the development and use of their own voice was connected to the fact women are only represented in 23% of all superintendent seats nationwide (U.S. Dept. Ed., 2012) and there is a societal belief that women have a hard time seeing themselves as leaders (Duerst-Lahti, 2010). The results of this study are significant because there are no current research studies examining the retired female superintendent's perspective on how she used her voice during critical moments in her career. This narrative study provided seven retired female superintendents the opportunity to participate in a self-reflective study where they were asked to share their lived stories and individual perspectives on how they used their voices and managed to be heard as female superintendents. The results of this study contribute to a broader understanding of the phenomenon of being a female superintendent.

The overall results of this research study indicate retired female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers to advocate for themselves and others (Category 1), they act as courageous activists (Category 2) and they are reflective practitioners (Category 3). The findings demonstrate retired female superintendents have positive self-

perceptions of themselves, which contradicts Duerst-Lahti's (2010) research claiming women have a difficult time viewing themselves as leaders. The participants described themselves as "strong," "caring," "dependable," "good listener" "honest," "committed," "tough," "principled," "ethical," "morally responsible," and "hardworking." The findings from this study also contradict Gilligan's (1982) research, claiming woman tend to be silent and passive because they are more concerned with maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions. The results of this study indicate female superintendents are not only prepared to speak up to advocate for themselves and others (Category 1: Theme 1, 2, 3), but they are aware of the political and personal consequences they will face for speaking up and "doing the right thing" (Category 2: Theme 4, 7, 8,10). Contrary to Niesche's (2017) research claiming, women are not prepared to address inequalities or biases within their organizations, the participants in this study shared multiple stories about how they used their voice and took action to address inequalities and biases. Participants in this study shared a common belief that they were "morally obligated" (Category 1: Theme 2, Category 3: Theme, 10) to not only speak up, but to take action to "do the right thing" (Category 1: Theme 2, Category 3: 10). Each participant also shared stories related to facing gender bias (Category 3: Theme 11) and the results of this study contradict the research claiming female superintendents acknowledge no gender barriers existed in attaining their superintendent position (Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, and Silvernail, 2005). All participants shared different types of stories related to some type of gender bias (Category 3: Theme 11) and the findings support the research claiming women are criticized by males and treated differently (Blount, 1998) and female superintendents have stronger feelings than their male counterparts about gender biases that exist (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2001).

The results of this study demonstrate female superintendents are reflective practitioners, who have endearing memories and no regrets with the ways in which they used their voices (Category 3: Theme 5, 6). The detailed stories of seven retired female superintendents contradict research that claims, women have difficulty expressing themselves in public, so others will listen (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997). All seven participants expressed confidence in their abilities (Category 1: Theme 1), described how their confidence with using their voice developed with experience (Category 2: Theme 7), and reported having no regrets with the ways in which they used their voices during critical moments in their careers (Category 3: Theme 5). All seven participants considered themselves to “caring” and “collaborative” leaders, and they believed these traits helped others see them as “strong” and “approachable” leaders (Category 2: Theme 4). These results support research claiming women rely on interconnectedness and interpersonal skills to be successful in their roles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990), but contradict Young & Skria’s (2003) research claiming, female leaders who demonstrate caring and collaborative personality traits are viewed as weak and ineffective.

As noted above, the results of this study contradict the following research studies:

- Women have a difficult time viewing themselves as leaders (Duerst-Lahti, 2010)
- Women prioritize maintaining relationships with others rather than asserting their opinions (Gilligan, 1982).
- Women are not prepared to address inequalities or biases within their organizations (Niesche, 2017).
- Female superintendents acknowledge no gender barriers existed in attaining their superintendent position (Gilmour, Kinsella, Moore, Faber, and Silvernail, 2005)

- Women have difficulty expressing themselves in public, so others will listen (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997).

- Female leaders who demonstrate caring and collaborative personality traits are viewed as weak and ineffective (Young & Skria, 2003).

As noted above the results of this study support the following research studies:

- Women are criticized by males and treated differently (Blount, 1998).
- Female superintendents have stronger feelings than their male counterparts about gender biases that exist (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2001).
- Women rely on interconnectedness and interpersonal skills to be successful in their roles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

In conclusion, the narrative stories from seven female superintendents can contribute the minimal research on the phenomenon of being a female superintendent in the twenty-first century and provide useful information regarding how female superintendents used their voices during critical moments in their careers. The results from this narrative qualitative study on the voices of retired female superintendents, supports research claiming women face different types of challenges in the workplace because of their gender (Rosenthal, 2002); supports research claiming women have to pass through organizational “gatekeepers” before reaching the superintendency (Duerst-Lahti, 2010); and supports research claiming “the struggle for legitimacy and equity has consumed an entire century and, while taking women many places, it has not increased their representation in the superintendency” (Brunner, 2012, p. xii). With less than a quarter of females in the superintendent role nationwide (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012) there are still many unknown answers as to why the U. S. Census Bureau continues to characterize the superintendency as "... the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the

United States" (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2004; Björk, 2000, p. 8). It is recommended we conduct more research to better understand how we can change the fact that women remain a minority in the superintendent position. The results of this study indicate females are strong, assertive and capable school superintendents who use their voices to advocate for themselves and others ([Category 1](#)), are courageous activists ([Category 2](#)) focused on "doing the right thing," and reflective practitioners ([Category 3](#)) who are willing to show their vulnerabilities and work collaboratively with others. This research provides evidence that female superintendents are successful at using their voices during critical moments in their careers and contradicts research claiming women go along with the societal expectation that men lead and women to follow (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The results of this narrative research study pose the question, "Since women are proved to be successful school superintendents, why do we not have more women in this role?"

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Appendix A

Invitation to Participate –Retired Female Superintendents

[Insert Date]

Dear Retired Female Superintendent:

As an experienced female superintendent in New England, I am conducting a qualitative narrative research study on the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents to complete my doctoral thesis at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Nationwide, there are fewer than a quarter of women serving in this position (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012) and I am interested in learning more about the lived experiences of women in this group. This narrative research study has been approved by the New England College Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research. The purpose of this study is to discover how retired female superintendents describe their experiences during critical moments in their careers and reflect upon how they used their voice during these moments.

I am seeking 2 to 3 retired female superintendents to participate in a pilot study of the interview questions and to provide feedback on the methods chosen for research study. Convenient sampling will be used to choose 2 to 3 retired female superintendents and the estimated timeframe for the pilot study is 1 month; 1 interview estimated to be about 1.5 hours, 3 hours consulting back and forth with each participant to ensure the meaning of their data has been captured accurately, and 2 hours for collecting their feedback regarding the methods used. Participation is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at any point without penalty and any data collected will be deleted/destroyed. All participants will receive a copy of the final dissertation upon approval from New England College.

Participants will be asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves, lived experiences and pre-existing photographs of themselves, and asked to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. There are minimal risks associated to this study, but it should be noted that the self-reflection process could involve the recollection of some unexpected memories and emotions related to critical moments in the participant's career. The researcher will provide the names of licensed counselors should any participant need additional supports because a negative memory has been revealed. The benefits of participating in this research study include empowering retired female superintendents to share their individual stories and perspectives on the development of their voice in a role that is traditionally reserved for men.

All participants and school districts will be given pseudonyms and the years of service as a superintendent will be used as the distinguishing demographic data. All data will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office and any electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer and hard drive. The raw data will be destroyed after 5 years. All participants will receive a copy of the approved dissertation.

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in a study that has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of female superintendents.

Sincerely,

Ruthann Petrino-Goguen
Superintendent of Webster Public Schools
Ed.D Student, New England College
Rpetruno-goguen_gps@nec.edu
508-254-1518

Dr. Debra Nitsche-Shaw
Professor, Education
New England College
dnitschke@nec.edu
603-428-2322

Appendix B**Invitation to Participate –Retired Female Superintendents**

[Insert Date]

Dear Female Superintendent:

As an experienced female superintendent in New England, I am conducting a qualitative narrative research study on the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents to complete my doctoral thesis at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Nationwide, there are fewer than a quarter of women serving in this position (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012) and I am interested in learning more about the lived experiences of women in this group. This narrative research study has been approved by the New England College Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research. The purpose of this study is to discover how retired female superintendents describe their experiences during critical moments in their careers and reflect upon how they used their voice during these moments.

I am seeking 4 to 8 retired female superintendents to participate in this research study. Convenient sampling will be used to choose 4 to 8 retired female superintendents and the estimated time commitment for each participant is a minimum of 19.5 hours over a 6-month period is estimated for each participant in the research study. This will include: 3 interviews estimated to be about 1.5 hours and a minimum of 15 hours of consulting back and forth with participants to ensure the meaning of their stories and words have been accurately captured. The anticipated time line for this research study is 6 months, and estimated to run from February 2018 through July 2018. Participation is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at

any point without penalty and any data collected will be deleted/destroyed. All participants will receive a copy of the final dissertation upon approval from New England College.

Participants will be asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves, lived experiences and pre-existing photographs of themselves, and asked to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. There are minimal risks associated to this study, but it should be noted that the self-reflection process could involve the recollection of some unexpected memories and emotions related to critical moments in the participant's career. The researcher will provide the names of licensed counselors should any participant need additional supports because a negative memory has been revealed. The benefits of participating in this research study include empowering retired female superintendents to share their individual stories and perspectives on the development of their voice in a role that is traditionally reserved for men.

All participants and school districts will be given pseudonyms and the years of service as a superintendent will be used as the distinguishing demographic data. All data will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office and any electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer and hard drive. The raw data will be destroyed after 5 years. All participants will receive a copy of the approved dissertation.

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in a study that has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of female superintendents.

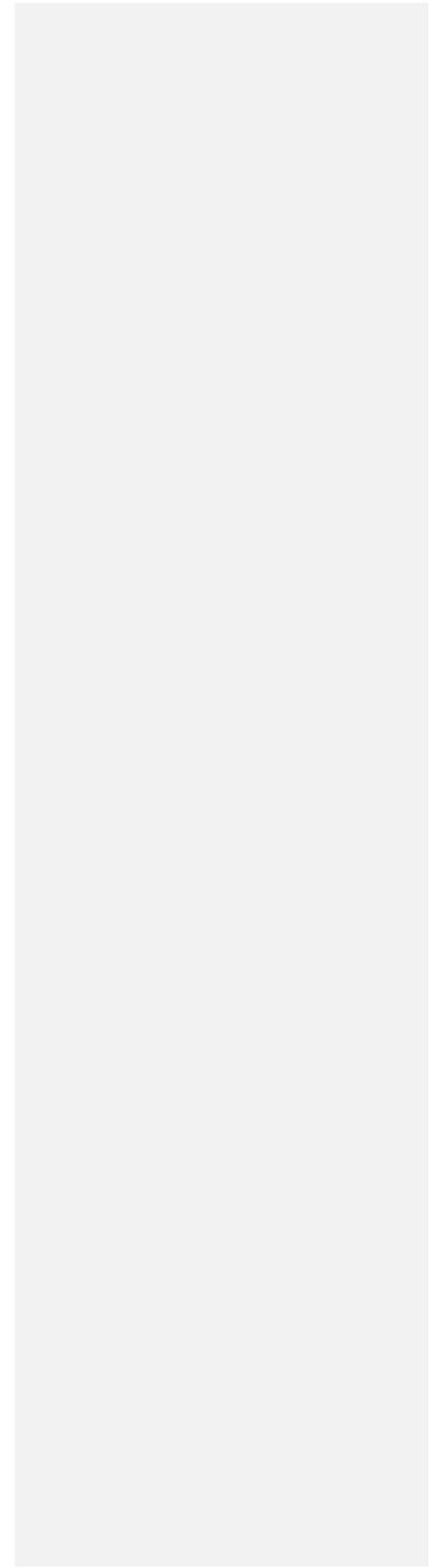
Sincerely,

Ruthann Petruno-Goguen

Dr. Debra Nitsche-Shaw

Superintendent of Webster Public Schools
Ed.D Student, New England College
Rpetruno-goguen_gps@nec.edu
508-254-1518

Professor, Education
New England College
dnitschke@nec.edu
603-428-2322



Appendix C**Informed Consent Form**

<u>Title of Research Project:</u>	Listening to the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents
<u>Principal Researcher:</u>	Ruthann Petruno-Goguen
<u>Sponsor:</u>	New England College, Department of Education
<u>Introduction:</u>	You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a retired female superintendent.
<u>Purpose of the Study:</u>	The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the stories of four to eight retired female superintendents and discover their perceptions of their voices in relationship to the critical moments they faced as women performing the responsibilities associated with a position traditionally held by men. This narrative research study has been approved by the New England College Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research.
<u>Number of Participants:</u>	Convenient sampling will be used to select 2-3 retired female superintendents for the pilot study to sample the methods and interview protocols. Convenient sampling will be used to select 4-8 retired female superintendents to participate in a 6-month study focused on Listening to the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents.
<u>Study Procedures:</u>	After signing and understanding the Informed Consent Form, 2 to 3 retired superintendents will participant the pilot study to test

the interview questions and collect feedback on the effectiveness of the methods chosen for the research study. The estimated time for the pilot study is 1 month.

After signing and understanding the Informed Consent Form, 4 to 8 retired female superintendents will participate in a 6-month research study that will include 3 interviews estimated to be about 1.5 hours and a minimum of 15 hours of consulting back and forth with the researcher to ensure the meaning of their stories and words have been accurately captured. Participants will be asked to share pre-existing work related photographs of themselves and at the last interview reflect upon their voice during the events photographed.

Permission to Record:

You will be asked to grant permission to record all interviews.

Risks:

There are minimal risks associated to this study, but it should be noted that the self-reflection process could involve the recollection of some unexpected memories and emotions related to critical moments in the participant's career. The researcher will provide the names of licensed counselors should any participant need additional supports because a negative memory has been revealed. Participants should not reveal anything that could cause or refer to a legal issue. The researcher will warn participant during the interview if legal issues are brought up or if the subject matter is not related to their voice during critical moments of their career.

There are minimal risks associated to this study, but it should be noted complete anonymity can not be promised even though that is the intent of the study and all participants and school districts will be given pseudonyms.

Benefits:

This study has the potential to empower retired female superintendents to share their stories and to provide meaningful information on how female superintendents create meaning and define their own voice during critical moments in their superintendency. The data will be used to further understand how female superintendents describe to themselves and others the critical moments in their careers and further understand how women in this role describe the use of their voice. This study also has the potential to change social perceptions of what women can do as female superintendents.

Costs:

There are no costs for participating in this study other than time.

Right to Withdraw:

Participants have the right to withdraw at any time during this research study without any penalty. All information collected will be destroyed upon your written withdrawal.

Confidentiality:

The results of this study may be published and all names of participants and school districts given pseudonyms. No locations will be shared and the years of service as a superintendent will be used as the distinguishing demographic data. Informed Consent Forms, demographic surveys, and field notes will be securely

stored in a locked cabinet and any electronic data will be stored on a password protected file and computer. The raw data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Contact Information: Primary Researcher, Ruthann Petrino-Goguen, 508-254-1518 or rpetrino-goguen_gps@nec.edu. Dissertation Chair, Dr. Debra Nitsche-Shaw, 603-428-2322 or dnitschke@nec.edu

Statement of Consent: You have been given and read this summary of this research study. Should you have any further questions about the research, please contact the primary researcher, Ruthann Petrino-Goguen. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. You agree to participate in this study and you understand that you will receive a signed copy of this form.

This form is valid only if New England College, Institutional Review Board, approval is shown below.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me in this document. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Retired Superintendent Printed Name Date

Signature of Researcher Printed Name Date

Appendix D
Interview Protocol

I am a female superintendent in New England and a graduate student at New England College working to complete my doctoral degree. My research is focused on Listening to the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents. I am conducting a qualitative narrative research study and would like to engage you in a process of conversations and self-reflection about your voice during the critical moments in your career as a female superintendent. I will be interviewing you at least 3 times and would like to ask you to share any pre-existing work-related photographs of yourself. To ensure the true meaning of your story, I will be conferencing with after the interviews to ensure I have captured the true meaning of your words, thoughts and feelings. I will tape our interviews and take notes during and after our conversations. I will analyze the data for recurrent themes and patterns and share the data analysis with you. At our last interview, I will ask you to reflect upon the pre-existing photographs you have shared and ask you to reflect upon your voice during the moments captured.

Please confirm that you have previously agreed to participate in this research study and have signed, read and understand the Informed Consent Form and you understand the methods of this research study.

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me about your lived experiences as a female superintendent.

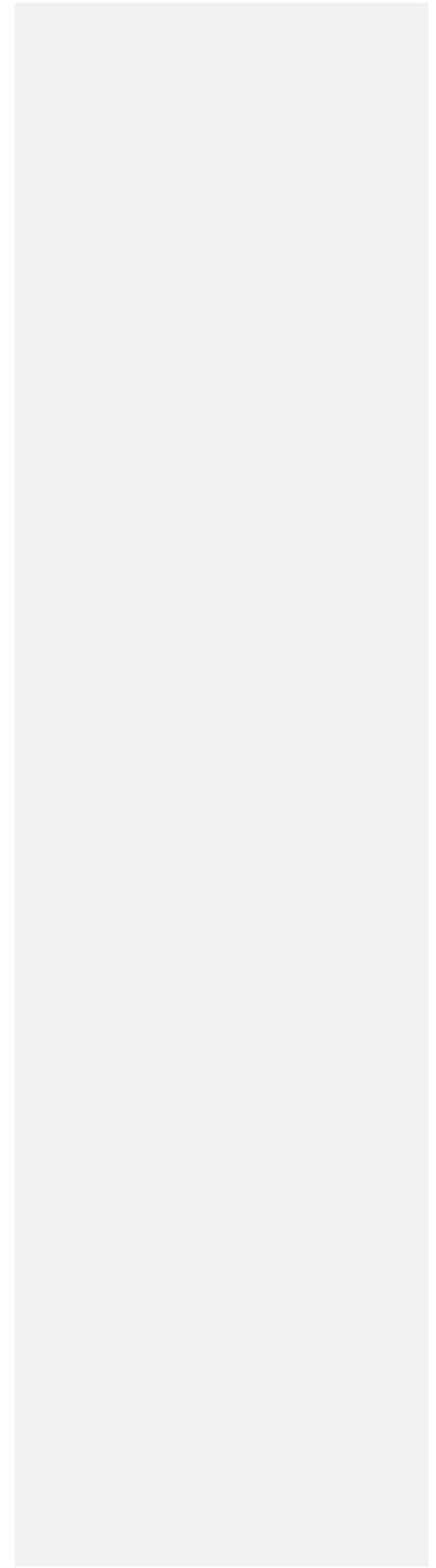
- Describe for me how you became a superintendent.
- Describe your district.
- Describe yourself as a female superintendent.

- Tell me about a critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to that critical time, tell me about how you used your voice.
- What does being heard mean to you?
- How did you determine whether or not you were heard?
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.
- How did your thoughts and feelings impact the use of your voice?
- Describe for me how others saw you during that critical time.
- How did you determine what others were thinking about you?
- Tell me about another critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to that critical time, tell me about how you used your voice.
- What does being heard mean to you?
- How did you determine whether or not you were heard?
- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.
- How did your thoughts and feelings impact the use of your voice?
- Describe for me how others saw you during that critical time.
- How did you determine what others were thinking about you?

In addition, participants will be asked to examine pre-existing work-related photographs of themselves and asked to comment on what they were thinking at the time of the photograph and how that impacted their use of voice:

- Tell me about this critical time in your superintendency.
- Thinking back to the critical time in this picture, tell me about how you used your voice.
- How did your thoughts and feelings impact the use of your voice?

- Describe for me how you saw yourself during that critical time.



Appendix E

Demographic Survey

1. Are you currently a retired female superintendent? Yes _____ No _____
2. Are you currently an employed female superintendent? Yes _____ No _____
3. How many years have you been a school superintendent? _____
4. Have you been a superintendent in another state? Yes _____ No _____
If Yes, what state? _____
5. Have you retired as a superintendent and returned to a superintendent position?
Yes _____ No _____
6. At what age did you enter the superintendent position? _____
7. What position did you hold immediately before becoming a superintendent?

8. How many districts have you been a superintendent for? _____
9. How many years did you work in education before becoming a superintendent?

10. If you had to do it again would you become a superintendent?
Yes _____ No _____
11. To whom do you report? _____
12. Do you receive annual feedback on your job performance?
Yes _____ No _____
13. Who designs your evaluations? _____
14. What type of training or educational program did you participate in before becoming a school superintendent?

None _____ CAGS _____ Doctoral Program _____
 Superintendent Licensure Program _____ Other _____

15. What is your highest level of educational degree? _____

16. Was your predecessor a male or female superintendent?

Male _____ Female _____

17. Was your salary higher or lower than your predecessor?

Higher _____ Lower _____ Do Not Know _____

18. What is the student population of your district? _____

19. How would you describe your school district?

Urban _____

Suburban _____

Rural _____

20. How would you describe yourself?

American Indian or Alaska Native _____

Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, or Other Asian _____

Black or African American _____

Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian, Chamorro or Other Pacific Islander _____

Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Hispanic, Latino, or

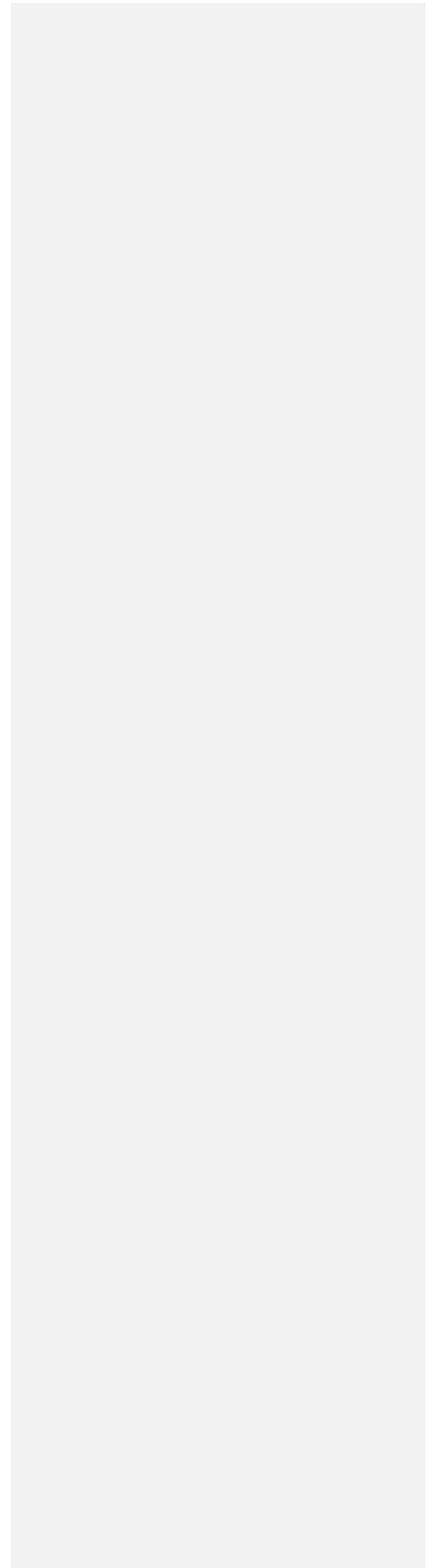
Spanish _____

Multi-race _____

White _____

I prefer not to answer _____

Thank you for your participation in this research study. This study will not discriminate based on gender, gender expression, age, race, color, religion, disability, sexual orientation or political beliefs



Appendix F**Request to use NH and MA Superintendent's State List Serves**

[Insert Date]

Dear Executive Director:

As a member of the New Hampshire School Administrator's Association and the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents I am writing to seek permission to access the contact list of retired female superintendents or ask your organization to send out an invitation to this group regarding the opportunity to participate in a research study I am conducting for my doctoral thesis.

As an experienced female superintendent in New England, I am conducting a qualitative narrative research study on the Voices of Retired Female Superintendents to complete my doctoral thesis at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Nationwide, there are fewer than a quarter of women serving in this position (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2012) and I am interested in learning more about the lived experiences of women in this group. This narrative research study has been approved by the New England College Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research. The purpose of this study is to discover how retired female superintendents describe their experiences during critical moments in their careers and reflect upon how they used their voice during these moments.

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superintendents to participate in the research study. Convenient sampling will be used to choose 4 to 8 retired female superintendents and the estimated time commitment for each participant is a minimum of 19.5 hours over a 6-month period. This will include: 3 interviews estimated to be about 1.5 hours and a minimum of 15 hours of consulting back and forth with participants to ensure the meaning of their stories and words have been accurately captured. The anticipated time line for this research study is 6 months, and estimated to run from February 2018 through July 2018. Participation is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at any point without penalty and any data collected will be deleted/destroyed. All participants will receive a copy of the final dissertation upon approval from New England College.

Participants will be asked to engage in a process of self-reflection by looking back at their past-selves, lived experiences and pre-existing photographs of themselves, and asked to share their current day thoughts on the development of their own voice. There are minimal risks associated to this study, but it should be noted that the self-reflection process could involve the recollection of some unexpected memories and emotions related to critical moments in the participant's career. The researcher will provide the names of licensed counselors should any participant need additional supports because a negative memory has been revealed. The benefits of participating in this research study include empowering retired female superintendents to share their individual stories and perspectives on the development of their voice in a role that is traditionally reserved for men.

All participants and school districts will be given pseudonyms and the years of service as a superintendent will be used as the distinguishing demographic data. All data will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office and any electronic data will be

stored on a password protected computer and hard drive. The raw data will be destroyed after 5 years. All participants will receive a copy of the approved dissertation.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance in locating participants for this important research study and look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,

Ruthann Petrino-Goguen
Superintendent of Webster Public Schools
Ed.D Student, New England College
Rpetruno-goguen_gps@nec.edu
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