

LEADING AUTHENTICALLY: THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY IN THE AGE  
OF SOCIAL MEDIA

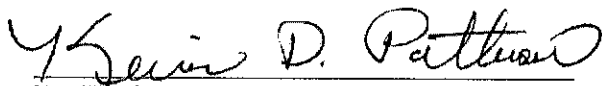
Gage Tiller

2022

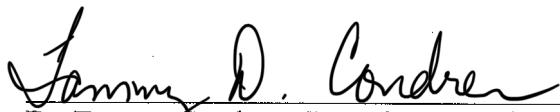
The undersigned, approved by the Department Chair of Graduate Studies in Education,  
have examined a dissertation entitled:

LEADING AUTHENTICALLY: THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY IN THE AGE  
OF SOCIAL MEDIA

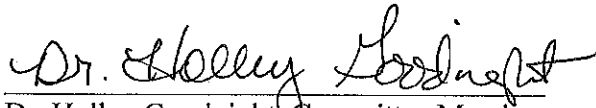
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“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” Colossians 3:23 (NIV)

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to better understand how the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents as they lead their districts and handle the stressors and opportunities of social media. The framework for this study centered Avolio and Gardner's theory of Authentic Leadership. Their theory included four tenets: relational transparency, balanced processing, self-awareness, and internal moral perspective. Participants for this study included practicing superintendents from each of Missouri's nine geographic Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC). The central research question for this study was: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media? The findings of this study included two themes: a) authenticity is being true to your why and b) social media is a tool. Superintendents shared that remaining authentic meant to always stay true to why those chose a career in education – to make an impact for students. They also shared that social media, and all of its positives and negatives, is still just a communication tool. It is not the basis for all decision making on how to run a school district. Findings from this study can benefit current and future superintendents as they seek to lead in an authentic and genuine manner while navigating all that comes from social media.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Today's superintendents operate in a politically driven, interconnected environment (J. Hart, 2021; Melton et al., 2019; Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). One of the major factors influencing decision making by leaders today is social media. Social media presents a number of challenges for any organization, including timely communication, the need for increased transparency, and the need to tailor communication efforts for various demographics (Duoug, 2020; Hope, 2019). The three largest problems facing superintendents today include job related stress, time demands, and social media (Tienken, 2021). Today, superintendents must be mindful regarding the use of social media opens superintendents up to criticism and negativity which cannot always be eliminated (Aiken, 2015; Shipley, 2017). Many superintendents are often asked to serve as CEO, CFO, public relations officer, human resources director, facilities manager, chief school liaison, and change agent to lead improvements within their district (M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Engel, 2020). "Superintendents are expected to be everything to everyone" (Engel, 2020, p. 4). Superintendents must constantly adapt to social, economic, and political pressures (Engel, 2020).

To operate effectively, superintendents must build quality, trustworthy relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Cabellon & Brown, 2017; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Hill & Jochim, 2018; Kotter, 1995; Sanaghan, 2011). Relationships are the "currency" by which school leaders are able to impact change and move their district forward (Sanaghan, 2011, p.

4). The foundation to any quality relationship is authenticity and transparency. Transparency and communication are essential to building trust within all stakeholder groups (Decman et al., 2017; Kirby, 2020; Melton et al., 2019). Subsequently, authentic leaders are consistent with their words and actions, show an appropriate capacity for their position, and are comfortable as individuals (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bird & Wang, 2011; Crawford et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2005; Kotter, 1995). The importance and necessity for authenticity evolves as one views the hierarchy within a school district, which peaks with the superintendent (Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). An authentic leader leads from the heart with passion and leans on personal values (George et al., 2011). Furthermore, authentic leaders are willing to listen to feedback and apply the feedback to their practice. Over the past decade-plus, the advent of social media and technology has placed increased demands upon superintendents for collaboration and connection with stakeholders. However, before effective collaboration can take place between any two groups, there must be a level of trust. Thus, superintendents must establish authentic relationships built upon honesty and transparency to successfully lead their district (Mendoza-Thompson, 2019).

School superintendents are asked daily to meet numerous demands including: advocating for their district, ensuring access and equity for students, communicating with stakeholders, and upholding financial and fiduciary responsibilities (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; Finney, 2019; Mamenta, 2019; Melton et al., 2019). Members of a school community seek communication and to remain current with what is happening in a district. Stakeholder involvement is at an all-time high, furthering the need to utilize

social media to communicate (Bhimani et al., 2019). In today's world, communication comes in the form of social media. Accordingly, superintendents must be able to eloquently and effectively maneuver social media while remaining true and authentic to themselves. Effective social media use allows leaders to become more in tune with their organization and build a stronger rapport with constituents (J. J. Hughes, 2018; Schillinger, 2019). Social media allows superintendents to interact with stakeholders, which is what constituents want (Decman et al., 2017).

Little research has been conducted on social media's influence upon superintendent's decision-making processes and practices. Through the lens of authentic leadership, this study aimed to gain a better understanding of how Missouri superintendents utilize social media to lead authentically. The researcher sought to better understand the lived experiences of the participants as phenomenological studies seek to understand and describe a phenomenon by reaching the essence of the participant's lived experiences (Peoples, 2021). Researchers agree, there are numerous benefits in gaining capital with parents and community members by utilizing social media to share information and establish transparent connections between the school and families (Berklan & Hughes, 2020; Chirichello, 2018; Hope, 2019; J. Hughes, 2018).

The remainder of chapter one will introduce the theoretical framework for this study, the problem statement, purpose of the study, definitions, and limitations, delimitations, and assumptions made within the research. Each of the aspects will lay the groundwork for the need to have a better understanding of how superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media. As today's superintendents face a

number of complex job duties which are only compounded by social media (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; Finney, 2019; Mamenta, 2019; Melton et al., 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework utilized for this study was authentic leadership (AL) as established by Avolio and Gardner in 2005. Leadership as a whole is a very ambiguous term (Murari & Mukherjee, 2021). Authentic leadership gained popularity in the business world in the early 2000's following corporate scandals such as Enron (George, 2003; Meza, 2018; Newport, 2017; Peterson, 2019). Bill George, former Medtronic CEO, and current Harvard professor popularized the theory of AL in his 2004 book *Authentic Leadership Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. The concept of AL remains very loose; the roots of authenticity can be traced to ancient Greek philosophy, meaning to be true to one's self (Gardner et al., 2005; Harter, 2002). A 2005 *Leadership Quarterly* piece by Gardner et al. posited four main components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2005; Kernis, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Leadership has always been a tall task, but today's leaders face unique stressors which call for genuine leadership. "We need leaders who lead with purpose, values, and integrity; leaders who build enduring organizations, motivate their employees to provide superior customer service, and create long-term value for stakeholders" (George, 2003, p. 9). Today's challenges have created a need for restoring hope and confidence in organizations. Subsequently, authentic leadership requires a great deal of self-awareness from both the leader and follower perspectives

as relationships must be built upon trust, engagement, and the well-being and attainment of organizational outcomes (Gardner et al., 2005). Accordingly, authentic leadership development requires a constant “development in context” (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 317). Thus, leaders must be intrinsically in-tune with their organization and all stakeholders to effectively lead in an authentic manner. Authentic leaders must utilize an internal narrative self-perspective to continually grow in their leadership practice to accurately see themselves and their lives, one must be in tune with their basic nature (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005). Thus, the importance of self-awareness is evident.

Transparency is a second essential component of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders display clarity, openness, and transparency in the communication and information sharing process. Because of a leader’s transparency, followers are better able to gauge a leader’s buy-in as leader transparency is the bedrock for a strong organizational following (Gardner et al., 2005; Harvath, 2013). Accordingly, transparent and clear communication is a form of teacher support. Even when communication is not always positive, engagement between leadership and stakeholders should still be implemented (Melton et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020).

Balanced processing is the process of evaluating the unknowns of a decision. Balanced processing includes evaluating the reactions to a decision, both positive and negative, and the ability to set aside one’s own personal bias (Gardner et al., 2005). Kernis (2003) stated leaders must avoid ego self-defense; through implantation of rationalizing decisions, using various viewpoints. Balanced processing posits that one

utilizes an unbiased approach to data collection and interpretation and seek all sides of an outcome prior to making a decision (Walumbwa et al., 2008). According to Harvath (2013), balanced processing is the process of evaluating the unknowns of a decision.

Authentic leaders are confident, self-aware, resilient, and optimistic. Such leaders are able to establish future focused goals and utilize relationships and social capital to achieve these goals. Authentic leaders are passionate in their purpose and display their morals routinely (Bird & Wang, 2011). Having a moral perspective requires self-reflection and self-awareness (George et al., 2011), but serves as the bedrock for strong leadership. A lack of morality by leaders over the past three plus decades has created a public distrust in leadership (Olsen & Espevik, 2017). Thus, it is imperative superintendents operate on a strong moral foundation aligned with their local constituents. Moral integrity is often seen as its own core value, but according to Olsen and Espevik (2017), it is an essential component of AL.

### **Problem Statement**

Over the past decade-plus, the advent of social media and technology has placed increased demands upon superintendents. The rise of social media has created an increased demand for storytelling and communication on behalf of school districts (Aiken, 2015; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019). Before effective collaboration and communication can take place between any two groups, there must be a level of trust. Superintendents must have relationships built upon honesty and openness in order to successfully lead their district (Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). Authenticity of both the leader and follower are required to build this level of trust (Gardner et al., 2005).

Superintendents walk the fine line between change agent and politician, at the same time, ensuring the needs of students are being met on a daily basis. Decision-making can either allow a superintendent to build alliances and relationships within their community or quickly become isolated (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Jordan, 2019).

The problem is little research has been conducted on the influence of social media regarding a school superintendent's ability to lead authentically. In a role of public leadership, individuals often develop a sense of inauthenticity in order to meet the stereotypes and demands of their position (Gardner et al., 2005). Through social media, schools and school leaders face insurmountable scrutiny and division. Little research has been done on how school leaders handle such scrutiny and the influence the scrutiny has on their decision making. There has also been little research on superintendents and their self-perception of being an authentic leader, much of the work regarding authenticity in education is focused more on classroom teaching. This lack of research on how social media affects a superintendent's decision-making processes and ability to lead authentically does not devalue the worth of a problem (Mills & Gay, 2019).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of superintendents and their ability to conduct themselves as an authentic leader in the age of social media. This study sought to understand how Missouri superintendents maintain authentic leadership while leading during the age of social media. Social media has vastly changed the world gives the ability to disseminate information in an instant, both good and bad. Successful superintendents must be able to communicate effectively to navigate the politics within their district (Melton et al., 2019).

Superintendents are often hired to be a change agent within their district and hired to lead the district forward through innovation and change. Yet, leading change can be challenging as many people often do not like change (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Change within a school district is inevitable. The ability to maneuver relationships with stakeholders and communicate change are imperative for successful superintendents (Decman et al., 2017). Superintendents are also tasked with providing outlets to stakeholders, both internal and external, to voice their opinions and concerns. Superintendents are expected to fill the role of community liaison (M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Engel, 2020). Because of this expectation, superintendents must effectively engage with stakeholders as they serve as the educational leader and chief decision-maker for their district (Decman et al., 2017).

Social media seems to be the perfect avenue to allow such outlet and communication (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Engel, 2020). Yet, many superintendents are hesitant to use social media for fear of the unknown and sometimes uncontrollable reactions (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; W. Hart, 2018; Shipley, 2017; Zwemke, 2020). Consequently, online formats often allow for negative and anonymous feedback from stakeholders (Cox, 2012). On the contrary, however, using social media to bring awareness to the district can help build trust with parents and build a connection (J. Hughes, 2018). Honest, open, and transparent lines of communication with the school board and stakeholders can build a level of trust which is essential for increasing the school district's potential (Decman et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2005). Educational leaders must view social media as a tool to enhance communication efficiency and productivity (Cabellon & Brown, 2017).

Prior research noted numerous superintendents are often hesitant to rely upon social media due to the negativity which can occur (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; W. Hart, 2018; Shipley, 2017). Thus, the current researcher sought to gain insight into how superintendents manage authenticity as defined by Gardner et al (2005); as a leader while living and leading in the age of social media. Therefore, this study sought to better understand the level of influence social media interactions and backlash have upon a superintendent's ability to lead authentically with self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective.

### **Research Questions**

Superintendents are expected to constantly adapt to social, economic, and political pressures (Engel, 2020). The role of today's superintendent is no easy task and takes a myriad of traits, skills, expertise, and discernment to run a school district effectively and adequately. The role of superintendent is extremely broad and grants the power to use the district budget as an avenue to drive vision and mission (Decman et al., 2017). Today's school leaders must demonstrate adaptability (Gil et al., 2019), but what is unknown is their ability to remain authentic and true to themselves as they do so. This phenomenological study employed a central research question followed by subquestions which offered a broad view of the study. The research questions utilized in this study were focused on Gardner et al.'s (2005) model of authentic leadership which encompasses four tenets of leadership. These tenets are self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective. This study was guided by a central research question: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media?

In order to clarify findings, the following subquestions were also incorporated:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents manage self-esteem and self-efficacy in the age of social media?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents maintain transparent relationships in the age of social media?
3. How do Missouri public school superintendents practice balanced processing in making decisions while living in the age of social media?
4. How do Missouri public school superintendents rely on one's internal moral perspective during the age of social media?

### **Significance of the Study**

In a role of public leadership, individuals often develop a sense of inauthenticity in order to fulfill the stereotypes and demands of their position (Gardner et al., 2005). Through social media, schools and school leaders face insurmountable scrutiny and division. Little research has been done on how school leaders handle this scrutiny and its influence on their decision making. There has also been little research on superintendents and their self-perception of being an authentic leader as much of the work regarding authenticity in education is mostly classroom teacher focused. This lack of research on how social media impacts a superintendent's decision-making processes and ability to lead authentically does not devalue the worth of the problem (Mills & Gay, 2019).

Effective communication skills and transparency are two perceived traits found in effective superintendents (Bird & Wang, 2011; Decman et al., 2017; Hope, 2019; Kirby, 2020). In today's ever-changing-technology-driven world, the ability to navigate social media platforms engagingly is imperative for school districts and superintendents. Since

the computer was named *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year" in 1983, communication has not been the same (Berklan & Hughes, 2020). Superintendents must be able to effectively engage stakeholders, hear their voices, and provide reason and transparency to decisions being made. Effective social media usage helps to "maximize communication, deepen relationships, and improve overall student achievement" (J. Hughes, 2018, p. 13). This study aimed to gain a better understanding of how superintendents remain an authentic leader while being faced with the repercussions and open forums created through social media.

Ancient Greek philosophy defined authenticity as being true to one's self (Gardner et al., 2005; Harter, 2002). With today's tumultuous society and social media driven world this can be a great challenge for any leader, particularly school superintendents. This research sought to add to the current body of literature and gain insight into the lived experiences of how Missouri public school superintendents practice authentic leadership while leading their school districts during the age of social media.

### **Limitations/Delimitations/Assumptions**

The researcher sought to provide information which was useful and practical for new and practicing superintendents and how these leaders approach social media within their districts. Educational research can present many challenges, roadblocks, and biases therefore there will be limitations, delimitations, and assumptions within the research.

The following limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of this study were identified:

#### **Limitations**

- Participant's answers may not be completely transparent, honest, or accurate.
- Researcher and participant biases are a possibility in qualitative interviews.

- Little research has been conducted on authentic leadership at the school district level.
- Demographics and job experience of participants will vary.
- Participant's feedback may vary based upon on-the-job experience and various events taking place in their district.
- The nature of personal interviews creates an issue of consistency.
- Inconsistency in the interviewee's definition of authentic leadership and application to their role as superintendent.

### **Delimitations**

- The sample population only included nine practicing Missouri superintendents, one from each RPDC region.
- Only districts with an enrollment of at least 1,500 students were eligible for participation.
- The study primarily focused upon Facebook and Twitter as the two platforms used by the majority of stakeholders which superintendents interact with (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).
- The study only analyzed the superintendent's self-perception of four tenets of Avolio (2005) and Gardner's (2005) authentic leadership, the theoretical framework utilized in the research.
- For the purpose of this research, "age of social media" is delimited to 2005-present.

### **Assumptions**

- It was assumed all districts utilized social media to a similar degree.

- It was assumed participants were honest in their feedback and provided unbiased answers.
- It was assumed all participating districts and superintendents utilized social media as a communication and engagement tool.
- It was assumed all participants had a basic understanding of how social media works.
- It was assumed all participants were in tune, to a certain degree, with feedback their district receives on social media.
- It was assumed all participants want to lead change within their district and move the district forward academically.

### **Design Controls**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of superintendents and their ability to conduct themselves as an authentic leader, as defined by Gardner et al. (2005), in the age of social media. Phenomenological research seeks to gain common experiences within a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frechette et al., 2020). Phenomenological studies allow the researcher to associate individual experiences with universal understandings (Creswell & Poth; Peoples, 2021). Qualitative interviews were utilized to compile the lived experiences of the phenomenon and data needed to complete the research for this study.

Data collection for this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Specific open-ended questions were utilized in each interview along with various probing questions based upon participants answers. Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence transcription software, was used to create transcripts of each

interview to analyze and increase accuracy of the qualitative data collected. This also assisted in minimizing researcher bias. One superintendent was selected from each of the nine Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC) (Heart of Missouri RPDC, 2021) across Missouri as defined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Including superintendents state-wide ensured a well-rounded sampling was used. To create honest and transparent communication within the interviews, participants were assured confidentiality of all answers and input provided. To create honest and transparent communication within the interviews, participants were assured confidentiality of all answers and input provided.

Phenomenological researchers must work to remove personal bias (Peoples, 2021). Thus, the researcher worked to remove all personal biases and focus upon the qualitative data provided via conducted interviews. This is achieved by bracketing; bracketing is the process of identifying the researchers preconceived notions and beliefs and suspending them throughout the research process (Peoples, 2021). This can be achieved by journaling one's beliefs and then comparing to the findings (Greening, 2019). Groenewald (2004) uses the term "bracketing out" (p. 50) to illustrate the ideology that the researcher removes opinion and does not take a stance for or against. The researcher journaled personal beliefs regarding the topic at the beginning of the research process to create greater awareness of one's personal biases (Greening, 2019).

The study was also limited to a small number of superintendents within the state of Missouri. Participants represented three classifications of school districts: rural, urban, and suburban (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Varying on the job experience created

a limit to some participants ability to adequately answer specific interview questions. The semi-structured interview process helped create consistent interviews for all participants. Analysis tools through Otter.ai helped to minimize researcher bias upon the completion of the interview process.

The delimitations of the study included the small sample size of nine participants representing nine school districts across the entire state of Missouri. The ideal number of participants in a phenomenological study is eight to 15 (Peoples, 2021). Additionally, only superintendents representing districts of at least 1,500 students were selected. The study focused on four basic tenets of authentic leadership: 1) self-esteem, 2) relational transparency, 3) balanced processing, and 4) internal moral perspective. Additionally, the primary focus for social media was Facebook and Twitter. As this research sought to better understand how superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media; age of social media was defined as 2005 to present (Ahmad, 2018; Jones, 2021; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Samur, 2018). Six Degrees was a platform launched in 1997; this was the closest to any social media platform as they are known today. MySpace commenced in 2002, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006. Since this research primarily focused on Facebook and Twitter, the year 2005 was selected as the beginning of the age of social media as we know it today (Ahmad, 2018; Jones, 2021; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Samur, 2018).

The researcher assumed participants provided honest and accurate feedback due to confidentiality. It was also assumed all participants had an understanding and were in-tune with the feedback that their districts receive via social media. Additionally, the researcher assumed participants had a basic understanding of social media and how it

works. To assist participants, the researcher provided a consistent definition/description of social media and asked participants to describe their personal social media usage.

An initial email (Appendix A) was sent to all superintendents of schools with an enrollment of more than 1,500 students. Based upon the email response, candidates were filtered by RPDC region and years of experience in their current position. One superintendent from each of the nine RPDC's was selected, ensuring a minimum of two rural superintendents, two urban superintendents, and two suburban superintendents. This allowed for richer more well-rounded data for analysis. Participants were assured full confidentiality of interview data. Key informants can provide relevant and thoughtful communications on a topic and participants need to be comfortable with the researcher (Mills & Gay, 2019). Transcription aliases were used for all participants to ensure privacy and protection of identity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Districts and superintendents were identified by a number based upon their corresponding RPDC. Therefore, the district chosen from region 1 is District 1 and the superintendent of that district is Superintendent 1; this method was utilized 1 through 9. Cooperation from participants in qualitative research often takes time and effort (Mills & Gay, 2019). Research is built upon trust between both parties, the researcher must uphold their end of the relationship and expects the same from participants (Mills & Gay).

Data collection was completed by conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants using open-ended questioning. Interviews were conducted virtually, via Zoom. Otter.ai, is an electronic transcription tool, which was utilized to analyze the interview recordings and assist with the accuracy of data as well as minimize researcher bias.

Phenomenological research aims to gain insight and describe experiences of participants of a phenomenon (Frechette et al., 2020; Greening, 2019; Groenewald, 2004; Peoples, 2021). Thus, the researcher worked to remove all personal biases and focus upon the qualitative data provided via conducted interviews. This is achieved by bracketing; bracketing is the process of identifying the researchers preconceived notions and beliefs and suspending them throughout the research process. Bracketing can be achieved by journaling one's beliefs and then comparing to the findings (Greening, 2019). Groenewald (2004) uses the term "bracketing out" (p. 50) to illustrate the ideology that the researcher removes opinion and does not take a stance for or against. The researcher journaled personal beliefs regarding the topic at the beginning of the research process to create greater awareness of his own personal biases (Greening, 2019).

The researcher attempted to add validity to the research by triangulating the data through interviews, field notes from interviews, as well as data from browsing district social media sites and district policies. The researcher reviewed each district's Facebook and Twitter pages for triangulation of data from interviews and field notes. Facebook and Twitter site locations were obtained from each participant during the interview process to check for consistency between interview data and real-life practices in their utilization of social media. Additionally, the researcher utilized member checking, interviewee review of transcripts, to further validate interview data. Field observations were made on the main District Facebook and Twitter pages for each school district. Along with their policies on social media usage and stakeholder interaction.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

**Authentic Leadership.** Leaders draw from lived experiences and demonstrate strong

self-awareness and self-esteem, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2005).

**Relational Transparency.** Presenting one's authentic self through openly sharing information and feelings as appropriate for situations (Gardner et al., 2005).

**Balanced Processing.** The ability set aside one's own personal bias when making a decision and view outcomes from all perspectives (Gardner et al., 2005).

**Internal Moral Perspective.** Being guided by internal moral standards, which are used to self-regulate one's behavior (Gardner et al., 2005).

**Age of social media.** For the purpose of this study, 2005 to present, based upon the inception of Facebook and Twitter as primary social media sites for the study (Ahmad, 2018; Jones, 2021; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Samur, 2018).

**Stakeholders.** One that has a stake in an enterprise. One who is involved in or affected by a course of action. Four main groups of people superintendents are held accountable to: school board, parents, community members, and staff (Melton et al., 2019).

## **Summary**

Today's superintendents are faced with the complex task of advocating for students and their districts, maneuvering local, state, and national politics, and communicating with and appeasing their stakeholders (W. Hart, 2018; Henrikson, 2018; Melton et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2019; Wright & Papa, 2020). Authentic leadership by school superintendents currently lacks research. Social media is a vital tool for school districts to communicate, as well as build transparency and integrity with stakeholders (Kirby, 2020). Yet, many superintendents are fearful to fully utilize social media due to uncertain and uncontrollable backlash (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; W. Hart, 2018; Shipley,

2017). Transparency and authenticity are two traits that are strongly desired by stakeholders.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of superintendents and their ability to conduct themselves as an authentic leader in the age of social media. This study sought to understand how social media influences self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral-perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) of Missouri superintendents. The researcher sought to fill the gap in current research regarding a superintendent's self-perceived ability to lead authentically through self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Chapter Two contains a summary of current research and literature organized thematically. The chapter begins by addressing the changing dynamics of district leadership, followed by the need for communication within education, and ending with the evolution of social media and its power as a means of digital communication. Chapter Three addressed the methodology and design of this qualitative study, including interview protocols and safeguards. In Chapter Four, the researcher presented the data found in the interviews and analyzed the themes that surfaced through the interview process. Lastly, Chapter Five summarized the findings of the research, the implications for practicing superintendents, and recommendations for future research in this area.

## CHAPTER II

### Introduction

The executive director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Daniel A. Domenech (2020, as cited in Tienken, 2021) said the following of superintendents, “To be successful, it is now a requirement for school system leaders to know how to establish useful relationships with community members, business leaders, and higher education officials, resolve conflicts between stakeholders, manage staff, engage and respond to school board members, and lead conversations about equity and inclusion, while still acting as the district’s expert on curriculum and pedagogy”(p. xi). Today’s superintendents face a myriad of challenges and difficult topics on a daily basis. They must walk the fine line between each of the roles noted by Domenech. Accountability in education is more present than ever before, coming from all levels – local, state, and federal (Bridges et al., 2019; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2019; Tienken, 2021; Wilhite et al., 2018; Xia et al., 2020). With this increase in accountability and ever-present scrutiny (Melton et al., 2019), superintendents must lead their district in an authentic manner. Adding to these daily challenges, is the barrage of social media criticism and questioning. Today’s educational leader’s face a greater call to remain in-tune with their constituents and provide authentic, clear communication and leadership (Bird et al., 2013; K. Curry et al., 2018; Melton et al., 2019; Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). Literature and research on professional development and learning needs of the superintendent position has been slow to develop (Tienken, 2021).

Chapter Two presents a review of current literature, aiming to provide support as to why this study was necessary, seeking to find the gaps in current research. Little

research has been completed on superintendent leadership from the lens of authentic leadership, particularly in today's age of social media. With increased accountability and scrutiny, there is a greater need for authenticity than ever before (Bird et al., 2013; K. Curry et al., 2018; Melton et al., 2019; Mendoza-Thompson, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework - Authentic Leadership**

The theoretical framework utilized for this study was authentic leadership (AL). Leadership as a whole is a very ambiguous term (Murari & Mukherjee, 2021). Today's news is filled with those that have violated the trust of their organization or those around them (F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020; Meza, 2018). Authentic leadership gained popularity in the business world in the early 2000's following corporate scandals such as Enron (George, 2003). Bill George, former Medtronic CEO, and current Harvard professor popularized the theory of AL in his book *Authentic Leadership Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value* (2004). With that, the concept of AL is also very loose. The roots of authenticity can be traced to ancient Greek philosophy, meaning to be true to one's self (Gardner et al., 2005; Harter, 2002; Waida, 2021). Authentic leaders display their genuine selves and reflect one's true values and emotions to build on their strengths (Gardner & Coglisier, 2018).

Leadership has always been a tall task, but today's leaders face unique stressors that call for genuine leadership. George (2003), made the call for leaders to lead with purpose, values, and integrity. He stated leaders should build organizations, motivate employees, and provide genuine customer service, and create value for all stakeholders. Today's challenges have created a need for restoring hope and

confidence in organizations. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been riddled with corporate and governmental scandals that have led to declining trust in leadership (Gallup, 2017; Meza, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Leadership must be developed over a period of time as the more self-discovery and development opportunities one has, the more they can lean on personal experiences to lead authentically (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Cappone, 2020; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020). The most valuable leadership lessons are developed through personal experiences (T. Hughes & Davidson, 2020). A 2005 *Leadership Quarterly* piece by Gardner et al. posited four main components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner & Cogliser, 2018; Kernis, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

### ***Self-Awareness***

Self-awareness is imperative to authentic leadership from both leader and follower perspectives, it is an essential leadership trait (George et al., 2011). Leaders must have strong self-awareness, one must know oneself before they can be true to themselves (Gardner & Cogliser, 2018). Meaningful relationships must be built upon trust, engagement, and the well-being, and the attainment of organizational outcomes (Gardner et al., 2005). Authentic leadership development is constantly developed in context (Gardner et al., 2005). True self-awareness is not a destination, but rather a continual process and it an overnight experience (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Self-awareness requires one to be in tune with their strengths, weaknesses, values, traits, feelings, and how their behavior impacts others (Kernis, 2003). Thus, leaders must be intrinsically in-tune with their organization and all stakeholders to effectively lead in

an authentic manner (Gardner et al., 2005).

Awareness comes in two forms: self-awareness and social awareness (Crawford et al., 2019). Authentic leaders must utilize an internal narrative self-perspective to continually grow in their leadership practice (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005). To accurately see themselves and their lives, one must be in tune with their basic nature, thus the importance of self-awareness. Authentic leaders are aware of one's ideal self and real self, knowing the difference of what they desire their purpose to be and how those around them actually view them. Leaders must have acute awareness of how their actions affect those around them. Authentic leaders display their genuine selves and reflect one's true values and emotions to build on their strengths (Cappone, 2020; Gardner & Coglisier, 2018; Waida, 2021). One of the many definitions of authenticity is given by Harter, "owning one's personal experiences, their thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to 'know oneself' and further implies that one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with their inner thoughts and feelings" (2002, p. 382).

Senge (2005) posits leaders should focus on their inner self. Though it is hard to research and investigate insecurities, weaknesses, and prejudices, they are key factors in true self-awareness. In order to practice true self-awareness, one must display great levels of humility (Senge, 2005).

### ***Balanced Processing***

The Second tenet of Gardner et al.'s authentic leadership model is balanced processing which is the process of evaluating the unknowns of a decision; what will

the reactions be to a decision, both positive and negative, and the ability to set aside one's own personal bias. One must practice great self-awareness in order to effectively practice balanced processing, as it requires an evaluation of one's stance on any given scenario (Gardner et al., 2005). Kernis (2003) stated leaders must avoid ego self-defense; through rationalizing decisions, leaders must use various frames of processing (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Balanced processing is the ideology leaders are able to identify and acknowledge their own personal biases, yet are still able to analyze a situation from multiple angles and assess the situation in a balanced manner (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Psychological research says that all humans are biased to a certain level. Thus, the term balanced processing is used in place of unbiased processing. Balanced processing posits one utilizes an unbiased approach to data collection and interpretation and is able to see all sides of an outcome prior to making a decision (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). According to Harvath (2013), balanced processing is the process of evaluating the unknowns of a decision.

Balance can be one of the toughest tasks for a leader. Leaders must work to navigate the dynamics of their organization while ensuring they are not sacrificing one for another when making decisions (Waida, 2021). Leaders practice balanced processing through the ability and willingness to accept positive and negative information and feedback about oneself without becoming defensive (Gardner & Cogliser, 2018).

Peterson (2019) described balanced processing as the degree to which a leader solicits various opinions and viewpoints prior to making a decision. As leaders work

through balanced processing with a growth mindset, they have a greater awareness of their own skills, views, and opinions. Thus, they are better able to make decisions for the greater good of their organization (Zins, 2020).

Shapiro and Gross (2013) present a model of ethical decision making that considers four ethical paradigms, including: Ethic of Care, Ethic of Profession, Ethic of Justice, and Ethic of Critique. The Ethic of Care is the process of evaluating who will benefit and who will be harmed by the decision. The Ethic of Profession is the evaluation of how the profession of the leader would handle a situation and what decision should be made. The Ethic of Justice requires leaders to consider the laws, policies, and procedures, as well as individual rights and the social justices that come with a decision. The Ethic of Critique is the evaluation of the policies, procedures, and laws at the time of the decision, and evaluating whether the leader is making the fair and equitable decision for all (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). The process can help a leader better practice balanced processing and minimize their own biases.

Superintendents who understand these decision-making processes give themselves a foundation for making sound decisions (Augustine-Shaw & Hachiya, 2017).

### ***Relational Transparency***

Transparency is a third essential component of AL (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders display clarity, openness, and transparency in the communication and information sharing process. Because of leader's transparency, followers are better able to gauge a leader's buy-in. Leader transparency is the bedrock to a strong organizational following (Gardner et al., 2005; Harvath, 2013). Relational transparency requires an openness with oneself (Crawford et al., 2019). It is created

by being genuine in one's self-disclosure in order to create more intimate bonds and relationships (Gardner et al., 2005).

Transparent and clear communication is a form of teacher support (Melton et al., 2019). Even when communication is not always good, there should still be engagement between leadership and stakeholders (Melton et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020). Leaders must develop trusting relationships through empathy and awareness of individuals around them (Cappone, 2020) and leaders must be clear in their motives (Waida, 2021). Authentic leaders are able to demonstrate their worth to their organization through the dedication and honesty they put into their relationships (Waida, 2021).

When leaders are transparent in their own actions, leaders invite followers to do the same and develop a deeper level of trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic and open approaches to communication can help build trust in the district and leaders (Poynton et al., 2019). Fullan (2011) said that strong leaders are able to understand another's position when working to form collective capacity.

Leaders must work to develop trusting relationships. Trust is often the variable that will dictate the level of success of a change. In order to earn trust and effectively lead districts, leaders need to be well versed in being consistent and reliable, being open and available to those individuals around them, and displaying respect and integrity. Words must match one's action to earn trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crawford et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2005; Kotter, 1995).

### ***Internal Moral Perspective***

Internal morals serve as the inner compass for leaders (Waida, 2021). Leaders

must have a moral perspective for the greater good and must withstand criticism to promote the success of all students regardless of external political and economic factors (Mitchell, 2019). Moral leaders are able to make a decision based upon what is good for the organization, not just themselves (Zins, 2020). A strong ethical core is essential to AL (Fullan, 2011). By practicing Shapiro and Gross' (2013) decision making model and considering the four ethical paradigms, decision makers are better able to consider the positives and negatives of a decision in regard to their followers.

Authentic leaders are confident, self-aware, resilient, and optimistic. They are able to establish future focused goals and utilize relationships and social capital to achieve these goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017). They are passionate in their purpose and display their morals routinely (Bird & Wang, 2011). Having a moral perspective requires self-reflection and self-awareness (George et al., 2011), and serves as the bedrock for strong leadership. A lack of morality by leaders over the past few decades has created a public distrust in leadership (Gallup, 2017; George, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Meza, 2018; Olsen & Espevik, 2017; Peterson, 2019). Thus, it is imperative that superintendents operate from a strong moral foundation that is aligned with their local constituents. Moral integrity is often seen as its own core value, but according to Olsen and Espevik (2017) it is an essential component of AL.

Ethical leaders are consistent in their words and their actions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). When words and actions are in alignment, leaders gain the trust of their organization and followers (F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020). Leaders also gain a greater sense of moral responsibility through education and years of experience.

Collaborating with other leaders is essential to this process (Dawson & Napper, 2020; Nasreen, 2019).

### **The Superintendent**

Superintendents are expected to fulfill several different roles in today's world (F. Davidson et al., 2019). "Superintendents are expected to be everything to everyone"(Engel, 2020, p. 4). A superintendent is viewed as the CEO of their district (Adamson, 2018b; Bjork et al., 2018; Engel, 2020; Klocko et al., 2019; Melton et al., 2019). They are expected to constantly adapt to social, economic, and political pressures (Engel, 2020; Mitchell, 2019). No job has higher expectations and such little trust as the job of the superintendent (Bell, 2021). Since the inception in Buffalo, NY in 1837, the position of superintendent has vastly changed (Bjork et al., 2018; Hart et al., 2019; Henrikson, 2019; Tienken, 2021).

The role of today's superintendent is no easy task and takes a myriad of traits, skills, expertise, and discernment to run a school district effectively and adequately. Establishing relationships within the community and school board, developing a positive culture, managing the budget, and being visible at school and community events are all vital components of a successful superintendent (F. Davidson et al., 2019; Fowler, 2019; Webner et al., 2017). The role of superintendent is extremely broad and allows the power to use district budget and resources as avenues to drive vision and mission (Decman et al., 2017; Kenney, 2020; Minberg, 2017; Wilhite et al., 2018). The weight of decisions made by superintendents has the potential to consume an individual, both mentally and physically (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019). Superintendents fill the role of “manager, planner, listener, communicator, and coordinator of community involvement” (S.

Davidson & Butcher, 2019, p. 63). The school and community relationship is reciprocal; each needs the other to be successful and achieve growth (Jordan, 2019). The Superintendent must ensure communication efforts offer dialogue to build trust and confidence in the school (Gearhart & Maben, 2019; Jordan, 2019).

A key role of the superintendent is to be a visionary leader. Once a vision has been developed with stakeholder input, a leader then can craft a vision for improvement and growth and garner the stakeholder support necessary to see the vision to fruition (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; Kotter, 1995; Senge, 2005; Wilhite et al., 2018). No vision or stance is nonpolitical, the superintendent must show the ability to win over individuals in the middle and on the outside (Hill & Jochim, 2018). Superintendents must understand leading a district forward requires internal and external relations (Melton et al., 2019). There is no one-size-fits-all answer to school district leadership, therefore superintendents must display the ability to be receptive and adaptive (Bjork et al., 2018; Engel, 2020; Stevenson & Lemons, 2021). Each decision must be seen as one large continuum. When encountering opposition in one area, superintendents must succeed in another to continue building trust and rapport (Hill & Jochim, 2018). Superintendents must actively display the attributes of authentic leadership: self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internal moral perspective to gain the trust of stakeholders and effectively lead change in their district (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This change process begins with the development of an effective and shared vision (Kotter, 1995; Senge, 2005).

### ***Superintendent Standards***

In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA)

approved new, relevant standards for educational leaders. The updated set of standards is known as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and replaced the former The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (NPBEA, 2015). The updated standards place a greater emphasis on student learning and preparing students for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (NPBEA, 2015). The result of this effort was 10 new standards for educational leaders, these standards are: 1.) Mission, Vision, and Core Values, 2.) Ethics and Professional Norms, 3.) Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, 4.) Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, 5.) Community of Care and Support for Students, 6.) Professional Capacity of School Personnel, 7.) Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, 8.) Meaningful Engaging of Families and Community, 9.) Operations and Management, and 10.) School Improvement. This set of standards combined communicated the expectations of school leaders to practicing leaders, support institutions, professional organizations, legislators, and the greater public (NPBEA, 2015). The standards provided a focus for central office administrators and school boards to effectively lead educational institutions in today's society.

### ***Visionary Leader***

One role of the superintendent is to be a visionary leader; a leader who can craft a vision for improvement and growth and then garner the stakeholder support necessary to see the vision to fruition (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Capullo, 2021; M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Wilhite et al., 2018). Effective district communications should align with the district's vision and mission statements (Chirichello, 2018; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Community collaboration gives superintendents a better idea of what parents and stakeholders want

and expect of the district (Bradshaw, 2019; Engel, 2020). Effective leaders must develop and advocate a shared mission and vision and for their institution (Kotter, 1995; NPBEA, 2015; Senge, 2005).

Open communication helps to establish a sense of shared ownership between various stakeholder groups (Bradshaw, 2019; Decman et al., 2017). Effective superintendents work to establish honest, two-way communication regarding both successes and challenges (Decman et al., 2017). Strategies used by most superintendents included identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication (Kotter, 1995; Melton et al., 2019).

The vision development and implementation process require three components: planning and preparing, collaboration, and communication (Hickerson, 2021). The preparation work allows superintendents to conduct their own research and data collection. Next, collaboration is the process of bringing in other stakeholders, both internal and external, into the conversation, creating a guiding coalition (Kotter, 1995). Thirdly, communication is necessary to bring the entire district and community on board with the idea and gain buy-in (Hickerson, 2021). Change often becomes a multi-year process which is the antithesis of what many leaders are taught, believing they must be visionary and transformational immediately. However, sustainable, research-based change is often a process which requires sustained efforts (Stevenson & Lemons, 2021). School communications should be seen as a way to build transparency and integrity. These communications should ensure chaos is avoided, not caused chaos (Kirby, 2020). For this reason, communication efforts should be consistent (Wukich, 2020).

School board members and administrators often struggle to understand their role.

Overlap in roles cause obstacles and mistrust within the district (Bridges et al., 2019). Blurred lines of authority between parties often leads to ineffectiveness (K. Curry et al., 2018). It takes great work from all parties to ensure the vision remains a focal point of all efforts (Briggs et al., 2017; Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Effective vision implementation requires buy-in from all levels within the district: central office, administrators, and teachers. A shared vision for collaboration and improvement cannot take place without system-wide implementation and buy-in (Capullo, 2021; J. Hart, 2021; Senge, 2005). Effective boards and superintendents establish a vision that targets student achievement (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019). Many states now list collaboration, board relationships, and communications as an area of superintendent evaluation (Henrikson, 2019). Honest and open lines of communication with the school board and stakeholders build a level of trust is essential to increasing the districts potential (Kowalski, 2005). Superintendents must recognize the importance, but also challenge, of working collaboratively with their school board (Decman et al., 2017).

In his piece *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, Kotter (1995) discusses eight reasons why change efforts often fail. Of the eight reasons discussed, three are tied to vision. The three reasons include: lacking a vision, under communicating the vision, and not removing obstacles to the new vision. Kotter posits the vision gives the direction toward which the organization needs to move and paints the picture through telling the story regarding where the organization is going. Without vision, often results and change efforts quickly die. Effective visions take time to develop (Kotter, 1995) and communication of the vision must be completed in more than just words. Therefore, Kotter says leaders must walk the walk, not just talk the talk (1995). In essence, leader's

words must match their actions, which incorporates a level of authentic leadership (Bird et al., 2013; Gardner et al., 2005).

Effective leaders understand vision drives a plan forward (Capullo, 2021; Wilhite et al., 2018). They must have an awareness of other's opinions, the situation in which they are operating, and understand situational context; leaders must display great self-awareness (Crawford et al., 2019). Authentic and open approaches to communication help build trust in the district and leaders (Gardner et al., 2005; Poynton et al., 2019). Authentic leaders are confident, self-aware, resilient, and optimistic. They are able to establish future focused goals, and utilize relationships and social capital to achieve these goals. They are passionate in their purpose and display their morals routinely (Bird et al., 2013).

### ***Instructional Leader***

Federal mandates enacted over the past few decades such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) have greatly increased the accountability for student achievement and increased the demands placed upon the superintendent position (W. Hart, 2018; Phillips, 2020; Wilhite et al., 2018). Increased accountability in student achievement has increased the expectations placed on superintendents to become instructional leaders and ensure best practices (Clouse et al., 2019; F. Davidson et al., 2019). Thus, effective school leadership has a direct impact on school and student success (Miller, 2018).

Superintendents serve as the instructional supervisor of the district, but are also the face of the district to the public (Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). Since the late 90s, school decisions have been made in a more whole-system, top-down fashion.

Subsequently, the increase in accountability often means central office is increasingly involved in curriculum and instruction. School leadership has shifted from supervising, monitoring, budgeting, operations, instruction, curriculum, professional development, accountability, and culture building (Henrikson, 2019; Lefdal & Jong, 2019; Tienken, 2021; Xia et al., 2020). The position has evolved from solely managerial to instructional and political leader in their community (Engel, 2020; Fowler, 2019; Henrikson, 2019; Melton et al., 2019).

Today's superintendent is expected to play the role of instructional leader for their district. The superintendent must acknowledge the importance of student achievement data and understand how to utilize data to have professional conversations within the learning organization. Though a superintendent cannot be an expert in every level of curriculum and instruction throughout a school district, it is vital individuals have a working understanding of the systems being utilized across all levels of instruction (Wilhite et al., 2018). Superintendents fill various demanding and fragmented roles, some of which they are not experts and require great collaboration; this includes instructional leadership (W. Hart, 2018). Generally, superintendents must monitor kindergarten readiness, ensure and increase access to Advanced Placement courses, foster college and career readiness, and tackle school attendance issues (W. Hart, 2018).

An overlooked aspect of district leadership which can impact student achievement is communication (Kraft, 2017). Effective communication plans can work to turn staff and parents into district ambassadors and further the support of all stakeholders (Chirichello, 2018). The community does not only want to hear from the superintendent when something is wrong. Effective superintendents make a concerted effort to

communicate with their stakeholders (Jordan, 2019). Numerous factors outside the classroom can affect a student's academic progress. One of those being parental engagement (Kraft, 2017). Building trust and communication is an on-going process (Hoerr, 2017). Superintendents serve as the liaison between the school and the community (Engel, 2020) and must tailor content to meet the needs of the demographics within the community (Hope, 2019). As instructional leaders, superintendents must develop a strong understanding of their entire organization and build meaningful relationships with all involved. Relational transparency is created by being true to oneself with others to develop stronger and lasting relationships which are necessary to improve instructional practice (Gardner et al., 2005; Senge, 2005). In sum, through authenticity, leaders can build social capital which can be utilized to lead the necessary change needed to impact student learning (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

### ***Systems Manager***

Superintendents face complex dilemmas on a daily basis (W. Hart, 2018; Mitchell, 2019). As superintendents are expected to be masters of each job demand, the job of superintendent could potentially rank among the top 10 most stressful jobs. A superintendent's job is an ever-changing job, with both great rewards and stress as superintendents face challenges, stresses, and political unrest (Tienken, 2021). Furthermore, the position requires morals, the courage to stand behind those morals, and the ability to advocate for all students (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020; Mitchell, 2019). The added duties and stresses have led to increased turnover in the superintendent position as districts often have a hard time retaining quality candidates (Hart et al., 2019; Melton et al., 2019).

As the chief executive, both the final say and blame fall upon the shoulders of the superintendent (Melton et al., 2019; Wilhite et al., 2018). When examining the role of superintendent, it is increasingly clear the pressure to make effective decisions which reflect the values of their district, community, and school board is one of many challenges faced by today's superintendent. Though there is no one-size-fits-all method to effective district leadership (Björk et al., 2018; Stevenson & Lemons, 2021), research shows that superintendents often put students and student outcomes at the forefront of their decision-making process (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; W. Hart, 2018; Tran et al., 2020).

Superintendents must always be aware of internal and external demands (Melton et al., 2019). Primary influencers upon the superintendent's decision-making fall within four main groups: school board, parents, community members, and teachers (K. Curry et al., 2018; Melton et al., 2019). Superintendents must always be aware of the multiple groups of stakeholders and gauge how decisions will affect each group (Cunningham et al., 2020; White, 2017). There is often a disconnect between leaders and those that their decisions affect (Schillinger, 2019) so creating a sense of shared decision-making is an important factor in a superintendent's success (K. Curry et al., 2018; Decman et al., 2017; Kotter, 1995). Education Writers Association's 2003 report (as cited in Decman et al., 2017, p. 1006) stated, "... the most effective decision-making processes are interactive." When stakeholders are disconnected and disengaged they are more likely to become adversaries of their district. However, getting a wide-ranging attendance of stakeholders at meetings and other activities can be challenging (Poynton et al., 2019). Not every decision will be in alliance with the opinions of many community members, but making

decisions together, when possible, makes it easier to overcome the instances of disagreement (Bradshaw, 2019; Jordan, 2019). Thus, it is important to build a reputation and relationships through negotiations, not detrimental sacrifices (Hill & Jochim, 2018).

One of the most publicized and scrutinized roles of a superintendent is managing a district's finances and budget as superintendents often fill the role of Chief Financial Officer within their district (F. Davidson et al., 2019; Engel, 2020). School district superintendents are running a multi-million-dollar operation (Adamson, 2018b). Finances and oversight of the budget consume much of a superintendent's time (Tienken, 2021) as school boards expect superintendents to be the one held accountable for the district's finances (Decman et al., 2017). However, financial issues require working through the political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Melton et al., 2019). Decreased funding is often a barrier in superintendent effectiveness as superintendents are asked to meet needs that are greater than ever before and to do so on a limited budget. This often leads to a salary freeze for their district and buildings left in disrepair. This forces superintendents to become creative in allocating each dollar their district receives (Minberg, 2017; Nyland, 2019).

As a steward of the taxpayers, the superintendent must manage financial resources ethically and responsibly. Superintendents have a fiduciary responsibility to adequately and appropriately allocate resources in a prudent and responsible manner. Ultimately, superintendents are responsible for the financial well-being of their district and many superintendents who find themselves in hot water do so because of finances (Wilhite et al., 2018). Superintendents can build trust in the community through being transparent throughout the budget development process (Decman et al., 2017).

Truly authentic leaders position themselves to match their personal core values with the values of their organization (Gardner et al., 2005; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). When a superintendent's personal values do not align with the values and beliefs of their district, diminished job satisfaction can result (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019). Accordingly, school leaders must process decisions with cultural, institutional, and individual experiences in mind; they must display a great understanding of the context of the decision being made (Crawford et al., 2019; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2019). Authentic leaders continuously develop in their self-awareness, transparency, balanced processing, and authentic relationships (Gardner et al., 2005). Balanced processing requires knowledge of the organizational context and capacity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crawford et al., 2019; Cunningham et al., 2020; W. Hart, 2018; Stevenson & Lemons, 2021).

### ***Communicator***

The daily challenges of superintendents are often compounded because they work within an environment of politics, bureaucracy, and media scrutiny (Melton et al., 2019). Communication, collaboration, and relationship building are vital to the success of a superintendent (Hattie & Zierer, 2018; Henrikson, 2019; Reeves, 2020). The ability to maneuver the politics of a district, understand who will or will not support a decision, and determine the level of backlash bound to occur all add to the complexity of the position (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Melton et al., 2019; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Effective superintendents must be both a politician and an educator (Adamson, 2018a; Beckham & Klaymeier-Wills, 2021; Capullo, 2021; F. Davidson et al., 2019; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; W. Hart, 2018; Henrikson, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2018; Maranto et al., 2017;

Melton et al., 2019; Mendoza-Thompson, 2019; Miller, 2018; Mincberg, 2017; Mitchell, 2019; Poynton et al., 2019; Tienken, 2021; Wright & Papa, 2020). Many superintendents have to move out of their comfort zone to accomplish both (Hill & Jochim, 2018).

As some facets of the position are political, superintendents must adopt strong working relationships and strategies to navigate the political pulls of the position (Bridges et al., 2019; Henrikson, 2019; Mincberg, 2017). Superintendents see the big picture; other stakeholder groups may tend to get tunnel vision around their own priorities (Nyland, 2019). The position has evolved from solely managerial to instructional and political leader in their community (Henrikson, 2019). This is particularly true for rural superintendents who are viewed as central figures within their communities (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019). It is more important than ever superintendents provide transparent and complete communication to all stakeholders. Even when communication is not flattering, these instances help build trust and gain credibility (White, 2017).

Stakeholder participation in setting standards and helping make guiding decisions increases buy-in. The greater the buy-in, the greater the fulfillment of the vision and mission of the district (Capullo, 2021; S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; Kotter, 1995; Senge, 2005; White, 2017; Wilhite et al., 2018). Superintendents answer to numerous stakeholders (Person et al., 2021). Strategies used by most superintendents include identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication (Kotter, 1995; Melton et al., 2019; Wilhite et al., 2018). First, community collaboration gives superintendents a better idea of what parents and stakeholders want and expect of the district (Engel, 2020). Next, open communication helps establish a sense of shared ownership between various stakeholder groups (Bjork et

al., 2018). Finally, Campbell and Fullan (2019) explained trust has little to do with mutual agreement and is more about respect and understanding. Accordingly, trust is established when people feel heard, understood, and respected. Furthermore, when members of the governance team believe that their colleagues are honorable, ethical, and honest, colleagues can disagree, yet still find common ground through the shared vision and values of the organization (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

Decisions often cause friction between the superintendent's core values and the expectations of stakeholders and their district (Decman et al., 2017; Melton et al., 2019; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Stakeholder response plays a large factor in decision-making. The process of including individuals effected by the decision is addressed as "360-degree decision making" (W. Hart, 2018, p.18). This process aims to limit negative reactions from stakeholders. Creating a sense of shared decision-making is an important factor in a superintendent's success. Change within a district is inevitable, the ability to maneuver relationships with stakeholders and communicate change are imperative for successful superintendents (Cunningham et al., 2020; Engel, 2020; Melton et al., 2019). The politics of a district can threaten the decision-making process; politics force superintendents to attempt to keep everyone happy (W. Hart, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2018). Because this is not always possible, superintendents must evaluate their goals and what they hope to achieve for their district. Honest and open lines of communication with the school board and stakeholders to build a level of trust is essential to increasing the district's potential (Decman et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2005).

Effective superintendents are able to lobby their stakeholders and legislatures in support of their district, solidifying their role as a de-facto politician (Björk et al., 2018).

Politics are interwoven into every level of a superintendent's daily job, superintendents will routinely be forced to work within the political framework (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Melton et al., 2019). Many superintendents are not aware of the political nature of the job and this leads to a diminished level of job satisfaction (Engel, 2020; O'Connor, 2018). This can be seen in the high turnover rate of US superintendents (Gallup, 2017; Melton et al., 2019; Mincberg, 2017; Riley, 2021). Effective superintendents frequent their state capital, connect with legislators, and learn what their legislators stand for. As superintendents better know and understand their legislators, they are able to connect their own interests to those of their legislators (Bjork et al., 2018; Engel, 2020; Hill & Jochim, 2018).

“Communication enhances relationships and builds trust in the community, especially with parents” (J. Hughes, 2018, p. 130). The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) noted the evolution of the superintendent over the years. This evolution included the roles of teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and now communicator. Effective superintendents must be able to play two or more of these roles at any given moment (Björk et al., 2018; Tienken, 2021). The most effective leaders are able to master communication (Engel, 2020). Kowalski's 2005 report, *Evolution of the School Superintendent as Communicator*, found that honest and open lines of communication with the school board and stakeholders build a level of trust which is essential to increasing the district's potential (as cited in Decman et al., 2017). Relational transparency is created by being true to oneself when interacting others to develop more stronger and lasting relationships (Gardner et al., 2005). Trustworthiness is a key identifiable factor in AL and to gain this

level of trust, one's words must match one's actions. Thus, transparent communication is vital to the trust and relationship building components of a superintendent (Bridges et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2005; Reeves, 2020). Overall, authentic leaders must rely upon past experiences to guide their own growth and journey through the trust development process (Burleigh, 2020).

### ***The School Board***

The environment in which superintendent's work is dysfunctional as the environment is increasingly political and filled with criticism. Unfortunately, superintendents often find themselves in the middle of political disagreements between board members (Capullo, 2021). The board-superintendent relationship is the apex of political flow between the district and its constituents (Maranto et al., 2017). School boards are a very political and their decision-making processes are politically motivated (Beckham & Klaymeier-Wills, 2021). Managing relationships with their board can be the most consuming part of a superintendent's job, but it is the most important (Bell, 2021; Tienken, 2021). Many states now list communication and board relationships as areas of the superintendent evaluation process (Henrikson, 2019). Superintendents must be able to navigate both school board politics as well as community-based interest groups (Burnette, 2020; Henrikson, 2018; Melton et al., 2019). Effective superintendents are able to predict the political landscape of their districts. Superintendent and school board relationships are in constant development and must be clearly defined. During political turmoil, effective communication with the board is imperative. Superintendents must lead their school board through appropriate professional development, including learning opportunities regarding the superintendent evaluation process (Henrikson, 2018). School board

members and administrators often struggle to understand their role an overlap in roles causes obstacles for the district. Effective boards create a unified front with their superintendent. Each party stays within their expected role while collaborating and trusting the other (Bridges et al., 2019; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019).

The relationship with the board president is the most important to a superintendent. However, they cannot overlook their relationship with the entire board and each member; these relationships require continuous work and development (Bell, 2021; Henrikson, 2018). Board relationships is listed on evaluation tools in many states (Henrikson, 2019). These relationships must be built upon trust and effective communication (Person et al., 2021). The public's perception of the board/superintendent relationship within a district can have a substantial impact on the community's level of trust in their schools (F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020). Superintendents must recognize the importance, but also challenge, of working collaboratively with their board (Decman et al., 2017). Competing agendas reduce board and district effectiveness (Bridges et al., 2019; Capullo, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic raised questions regarding educational leadership and governance as the pandemic placed great strains on superintendent-board relationships (Houp, 2021). Superintendents had to lead their districts quickly and unexpectedly through the unknowns and politics of the COVID-19 Pandemic. They had to become acutely aware of their school board and community's stance on the politics associated with the outbreak. Leaders reaction to the pandemic varied greatly (Crayne & Medeiros, 2020; Lochmiller, 2021), and the pandemic influenced the decision-making process used by many superintendents. They now had to change how information was being used to

influence stakeholder perspective. The pandemic caused divisive shifts within board voting. Superintendents that previously had a general idea of how a vote would go but were now left in the dark as to what an outcome might be (Lochmiller, 2021).

Accordingly, the challenges brought about by the pandemic have led to an increase of superintendents leaving the position (Capullo, 2021; Riley, 2021).

Effective leaders are responsible for creating new self-awareness, leading with purpose, and relating to all stakeholders (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crawford et al., 2019). Superintendents must adopt strong working relationships and strategies to navigate the political pulls of the position. Communication, collaboration, and relationship building are vital to the success of a superintendent (Bridges et al., 2019; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019; Engel, 2020; Henrikson, 2018, 2019; Kotter, 1995; Reeves, 2020). Leaders that are able to develop strong authentic relationships practice relational transparency and strong internal moral perspective to help define those relationships (Gardner et al., 2005; George, 2003).

### **Social Media**

In 2020, approximately 3.6 billion people utilized social media around the globe (Clement, 2020). Seven in 10 Americans use social media and more than eight in 10 Americans between 18 to 29 are on social media sites (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Social media has replaced word of mouth and traditional media (Lavergne, 2017; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2018; Zhu & Liu, 2021). In contrast, less than half of Americans over 65 are on social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

Social media can be used to increase communication and collaboration (Mamenta, 2019). Traditional written communication such as newsletters and newspaper stories

create a barrier between the communicator and their audience, the two-way communication abilities of social media has removed that barrier (Duoug, 2020; Gearhart & Maben, 2019). Social media allows superintendents to create open, collaborative, two-way communications, yet many organizations fail to take advantage of such opportunities (Gearhart & Maben, 2019; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019). Superintendents need to become comfortable with the various social media tools available and become their own storytellers before someone else does (Aiken, 2015; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019; Sanfelippo, 2021). The utilization of social media as a communication tool helps bring awareness to the district, build trust with parents, and build connections with the community (J. Hughes, 2018; Melton et al., 2019). Trustworthiness is a key identifiable factor in authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005). If school leaders fail to emphasize collaboration, leaders are further hindering trust and communication (Hattie & Zierer, 2018; Reeves, 2020).

The utilization of social media has many benefits to a school district and superintendents and aides in connecting and building trust with stakeholders (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019; Schillinger, 2019). By creating avenues for two-way communication, social media can assist superintendents in balanced processing as it helps leaders recognize all sides of an issue or decision and supports their awareness of positive and negative information and feedback about oneself without becoming defensive (Gardner & Coglisier, 2018; Schillinger, 2019; Stieglitz et al., 2018).

With the increased opportunities to build social capital and connect and collaborate with one's community, social media has also brought about numerous challenges for superintendents (Wright & Papa, 2020). Social media sites come with

great opportunities for good, but they also come with endless opportunities for the spread of misinformation and negativity; both of which are virtually impossible to contain (Burleigh, 2020; Cox, 2012; Duoug, 2020; Obiata et al., 2021; Shipley, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). The COVID pandemic exacerbated the spreading of misinformation through social media platforms (Obiata et al., 2021). Leaders are often hesitant to rely too heavily upon social media due to its many negative drawbacks (Aiken, 2015; Shipley, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Another drawback to social media communication is it only reaches certain demographics, only 45% of those 65 or older say they utilize social Media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). According to Howe (2018), those 75 and older have the highest net worth across all age brackets. Thus, social media is ineffective in reaching the wealthier constituents within a community. Communication from a superintendent is essential to build the trust and relationship with their community, this includes this aging demographic that may not utilize social media (Bridges et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2005; Reeves, 2020). Even when communication is not always positive, there should still be engagement between leadership and stakeholders (Melton et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020). This open and transparent communication is a vital component of relational transparency and being viewed as an authentic leader (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

### ***Connectivity***

Social media platforms allow for loosely organized communication and connections to become established. It allows for increased and immediate interactions (Cox, 2012; Duoug, 2020; Gearhart & Maben, 2019; Shipley, 2017). When properly utilized, social media allows superintendents to connect with others professionally and grow in their practice (Cox, 2012). However, these are not always positive interactions

(Stieglitz et al., 2018).

Scholars are working to understand the role of social media in managing how information flows within and from an organization (Bhimani et al., 2019). As leaders utilize social media to become engaged in their organization, social media can give them a greater sense of connectivity to those within their organization (Gearhart & Maben, 2019; Mamenta, 2019; Schillinger, 2019). Greater utilization of social media as a communication tools allows organization an opportunity to control the narrative (Aiken, 2015; Hughes 2018; Mamenta, 2019).

When stakeholders are disconnected and disengaged they are more likely to become adversaries of their district (Poynton et al., 2019). By utilizing social media to connect to parents and the community, districts can build trust and social capital by making those groups feel as if they are in the know (J. Hughes, 2018; Lavergne, 2017; Schillinger, 2019). Using emotion in social media posts allows for connection to stakeholders and builds support. Social media lends itself to the rapid dissemination of information. Particularly in times of crisis or when student safety may be at risk (Cunningham et al., 2020). Through social media, leaders can connect with various groups, even those outside their geographic community (Bhimani et al., 2019; Xu & Saxton, 2018). The constant connectedness is mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting for leaders (Wright & Papa, 2020). However, superintendents can also utilize social media to build their professional network and connect with fellow superintendents outside of their geographical region (Lefdal & Jong, 2019).

Social media provides districts an opportunity to quickly tell their story; it creates opportunity for communication and collaboration like never before (Mamenta, 2019;

Nyland, 2019; Sanfelippo, 2021). When there is a lack of engaging and relevant content available, others begin to create their own stories of the school (J. Hughes, 2018). When others start telling the school's story, they are often negative and inaccurate as social media is ripe with misinformation (Cox, 2012; Englmeier, 2021; Obiata et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019). The superintendent should play an active role in the social media presence of a district (Sanfelippo, 2021). They should become comfortable with social media and the various tools that are available to tell their district's story (Aiken, 2015). However, they must be mindful of the potential negativity (Shipley, 2017). Desert Sands, California superintendent Bailey has managed to harness this power of connectivity through his regular event coined *Bailey & Coffee*. During these events, he communicates with community members and various stakeholders about his district and its opportunities and challenges (NSPRA, 2019; Uken, 2019). Through these efforts, Bailey was touted as a "Superintendent to Watch in 2108-2019" by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). Bailey notes, the thought behind *Bailey & Coffee* was to improve two-way communication with stakeholders and provide access to the communities that he serves. These events are live streamed via social media platforms to allow for people across his 750 square mile district to participate and keep up with the happenings of the district (Uken, 2019).

Authentic leaders are confident, self-aware, resilient, and optimistic. They are able to establish future focused goals and utilize relationships and social capital to achieve these goals. They are passionate in their purpose and display their morals routinely (Bird & Wang, 2011). Authentic leaders recognize social media activity is an avenue to accrue social capital and social capital helps organizations work to achieve

their mission (Sanfelippo, 2021; Xu & Saxton, 2018).

### ***Opportunities and Detractors of Collaboration and Engagement***

Today's technology allows superintendent communications to have a wider span than ever before as social media provides the opportunity to connect to specific groups (Bhimani et al., 2019; Cabellon & Brown, 2017; Cox & McLeod, 2014; Cunningham et al., 2020; J. Hughes, 2018; Lavergne, 2017; Stieglitz et al., 2018). Superintendents understand that these tools are a blessing and curse. The speed at which information travels does not always allow a superintendent to get ahead of a decision before stakeholders begin demanding answers (Bhimani et al., 2019; Duoug, 2020; Shipley, 2017; Wang et al., 2019; Wilhite et al., 2018; Wright & Papa, 2020). Though the ease of communication has increased, school-parent communication over the last decade remains low as many superintendents struggle to effectively harness the full potential of social media (Gearhart & Maben, 2019; Gearhart, 2018; J. Hughes, 2018; Kraft, 2017; Wright & Papa, 2020). Social media platforms can help bridge this gap when used effectively as social media serves as a way to promote interactions with various stakeholders, connect groups, and inform the public (Bhimani et al., 2019; Cabellon & Brown, 2017; Cox & McLeod, 2014; Cunningham et al., 2020; J. Hughes, 2018; Lavergne, 2017; Stieglitz et al., 2018).

Social media tools, however, must be utilized appropriately, as they can present just as many challenges as opportunities (Wilhite et al., 2018). Superintendents utilize social media as a one-way tool; rarely do they engage with stakeholders and take advantage of social media as a collaborative tool (Aiken, 2015; Gearhart & Maben, 2019; J. Hughes, 2018; Kraft, 2017; Maben & Gearhart, 2018; Wright & Papa, 2020). Social

media can allow for a more in-depth discussion of the basis for why the decision was made. It serves as a way to promote interactions with various stakeholders, connect groups, and inform the public (Aiken, 2015; Bhimani et al., 2019; Cox, 2012; Schillinger, 2019). Some decisions do not allow for time to seek input, in those cases superintendents must be able to eloquently explain their rationale for the decision and work to garner support for the decision that was made (Decman et al., 2017).

When making tough or quick decision, as superintendents often do (Decman et al., 2017; W. Hart, 2018; Melton et al., 2019; Nyland, 2019; Wilhite et al., 2018), relational transparency comes into play (Crawford et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2005; Gearhart & Maben, 2019; Harvath, 2013; Klocko et al., 2019). The more trust and social capital the superintendent has acquired, the less the public will question or criticize the decision made (Bird et al., 2013; Bridges et al., 2019; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2019; Harvath, 2013; Sanfelippo, 2021; Xu & Saxton, 2018). By seeking input and collaborating via social media, leaders are able to gain a greater perspective into their stakeholder's views (Bradshaw, 2019; Capullo, 2021; Decman et al., 2017; Walumbwa et al., 2010). With this information in mind, leaders can practice greater balanced processing. By putting this to practice, leaders are better able to predict the reactions to a decision, both positive and negative (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner & Cogliser, 2018).

### ***Misinformation***

Technology such as social media can prevent a superintendent from having the opportunity to make a well thought out, informed decision prior to stakeholders demanding answers (Wilhite et al., 2018). With social media, what happens at school

does not stay at school. And what happens outside of school often makes its way into schools (Wright & Papa, 2020). Social media sites come with great opportunities for good, but they also come with endless opportunities for the spread of misinformation (Englmeier, 2021; Obiata et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Misinformation is the term given to false information that is intentionally spread in order to generate doubt in a decision or organization (Wang et al., 2019).

Ethical decision making within the educational system should be common practice, however it is not; which brings it to the forefront of conversation due to the amount of misinformation that takes place on social forums (Burleigh, 2020). There is lack of research regarding educational leader's use of social media to make decisions and how social media is utilized to garner insight from stakeholders. Ethical decision-making must include due-process for all involved, considering factors such as inclusion, care, professionalism, and equality (Burleigh, 2020). The number of corporate scandals involving unethical decisions over the past few decades has increased the amount of doubt and misinformation spread regarding leaders (K. Curry et al., 2018), and thus led to an increased call for authentic leaders (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005).

Because leaders are routinely faced with dilemmas that cause conflict, they must rely upon their internal moral perspective when making decisions for their organizations (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; Gardner & Cogliser, 2018; Harvath, 2013; Mitchell, 2019). Dilemmas faced by superintendents are rarely solved in a binary manner, they often have a level of ambiguity (F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020). District leaders must have a moral perspective for the greater good. They must withstand criticism and be able to promote the success of all

students regardless of external political and economic factors (Mitchell, 2019). Moreover, student outcomes are often the driving factor behind decision-making for superintendents (Bridges et al., 2019; W. Hart, 2018; Nyland, 2019; Tran et al., 2020). News outlets and social media are overrun with stories of educators acting unethically, educational leaders must work to create a system that fosters ethical action and provides protection for those who report such actions. Superintendents must create an atmosphere where all staff feel empowered to work collaboratively and collectively to solve situations that call for ethical decisions to be made (Burleigh, 2020).

### **Summary**

Filling the role of superintendent and leading a school district is no easy task. Coupling the demands of district leadership with the inter-connectedness of today's social-media-driven world and the demands become even greater. Superintendents are expected to wear multiple hats: educational leader, community liaison, chief finance officer, and public relations officer (Bjork et al., 2018; M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Henrikson, 2018; Wilhite et al., 2018).

Social media has connected individuals in a way like never before. People can get their news instantaneously, form connections with individuals that they would not otherwise connect with, and form coalitions to rally support or dissent for school-related issues in unprecedented ways (Aiken, 2015; Cunningham et al., 2020; J. Hughes, 2018; Lavergne, 2017; Schillinger, 2019; Stieglitz et al., 2018; Wilhite et al., 2018). The power of social media has yet to be harnessed by school leaders, particularly superintendents as they work to navigate the politics of their position. The politics of a district can threaten the decision-making process (Decman et al., 2017). Social media is now possibly more

likely to shape the opinion of the public than traditional media (Zhu & Liu, 2021). As superintendents work to utilize social media as means of communication with their stakeholders, leaders can also utilize social media as a tool for input and decision-making. Today's superintendents must act as the chief public relations officer for their district. They are tasked with leveraging community support for their district and new initiatives taking place (Chirichello, 2018; Cunningham et al., 2020; Wilhite et al., 2018). Little research could be found on the decision-making processes put into practice by district superintendents and how social media may or may not impact those practices. Social media is a very complex and relatively new tool to the world of educational leaders. The threat of negative information or misinformation causes superintendents to hesitate when it comes to utilizing social media appropriately (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; W. Hart, 2018; Sanfelippo, 2021; Shipley, 2017).

This research sought to fill the gap in how today's school superintendents lead authentically in times of growing social media presence through gaining a better understanding of their lived experiences (Peoples, 2021). Leaders in today's society face increased scrutiny due to a myriad of corporate scandals over the past two decades (Bird et al., 2013; K. Curry et al., 2018). This scrutiny is only exacerbated by social media platforms. Superintendents must build social capital by leading authentically to help overcome this scrutiny (Bird et al., 2013; Bridges et al., 2019; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2019; Harvath, 2013; Sanfelippo, 2021; Xu & Saxton, 2018). One way to build that capital is to lead in an authentic manner. Superintendents must reflect upon how their values are mirrored in their practice and consider the alignment between the two (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019). Authentic leadership is the idea of

practicing strong self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and having a strong internal moral perspective to develop strong, meaningful, and trustworthy relationships with one's followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bird et al., 2013; Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner & Cogliser, 2018; Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). Authentic leaders lead from within and lean upon their values (George et al., 2011). Today's superintendents face a number of challenges, yet they are able to leverage their position to influence students and prepare the next generation of ethical and informed citizens (Mitchell, 2019).

In Chapter Three, the researcher provided the methodology utilized in this qualitative phenomenological study, including the design and procedures. In Chapter Four, the findings and experiences of the research participants through the interview process. Lastly, Chapter Five outlined the conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER III

### Introduction

The complexities of the school superintendency and district leadership are well noted in past research (W. Hart, 2018; Henrikson, 2018; Melton et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2019; Wright & Papa, 2020). What is unknown is the influence social media plays upon the complexities and how social media influences a superintendent's ability to lead their districts authentically. Gone are the days of report cards and press releases being sufficient school communications. Districts can leverage power of social media as free marketing (Mamenta, 2019). This study aimed to explore the gap in research on superintendent's ability to conduct themselves as an authentic leader as defined by Gardner et al. in the social media age (2005).

The researcher utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to gain a better understanding as to how superintendents lead their district while practicing self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective. Little research has been conducted on the connection between authentic school leadership and social media. Phenomenological studies aim to understand the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frechette et al., 2020; Peoples, 2021). These studies allow the researcher to associate individual experiences with universal understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted with participants which included an open-ended central question to encourage description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This chapter describes the methods employed to conduct this study and analyze the findings of the qualitative research conducted. The chapter covers the research

questions which guided the study, followed by the methodology used to complete and administer the interviews used to compile the necessary information to conduct this study. The population, interview protocol and questionnaire, and procedures are covered in-depth. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the methodology utilized in the completion of this study.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of superintendents and their ability to conduct themselves as an authentic leader in the age of social media. This study sought to understand how social media influences self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral-perspective of Missouri superintendents. Social media has vastly changed the world, as we know it, and allows the ability to disseminate information instantly, both good and bad. Successful superintendents must be able to communicate effectively to navigate the politics within their district (Melton et al., 2019). Superintendents are often hired to be a change agent within their district, to lead the district forward through innovation and change. Yet, people often do not like change (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Change within a district is inevitable, the ability to maneuver relationships with stakeholders and communicate change are imperative for successful superintendents (Decman et al., 2017). Superintendents are also tasked with providing outlets to stakeholders, both internal and external, for voicing their opinions and concerns. Superintendents are expected to fill the role of community liaison (M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Engel, 2020). Because of this expectation, superintendents must effectively engage

with stakeholders as they act to serve as educational leader and chief decision-maker for their district (Decman et al., 2017). Social media seems to be the perfect outlet for allowing such communication (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Engel, 2020). Yet, many superintendents are hesitant to use social media for fear of the unknown and sometimes uncontrollable reactions (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; W. Hart, 2018; Shipley, 2017). Online formats often allow for negative and anonymous feedback from stakeholders (Cox, 2012). However, using social media to bring awareness to the district and helps build trust and connections with parents (J. Hughes, 2018). Honest, open, and transparent lines of communication with the school board and stakeholders build a level of trust essential to increasing the district's potential (Decman et al., 2017; Kowalski, 2005). Educational leaders must begin to view social media as a tool to enhance communication efficiency and productivity (Cabellon & Brown, 2017). Research noted superintendents are hesitant to rely upon social media due to the negativity (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; W. Hart, 2018; Shipley, 2017). Thus, the researcher sought to gain insight into how superintendents manage their authenticity as a leader, as defined by Gardner et al. (2005), while living and leading in the age of social media. This study sought to better understand the level of influence social media interactions and repercussions have upon a superintendent's ability to lead authentically with self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective.

### **Research Questions**

This phenomenological study employed a central research question followed by subquestions that offered a broad view of the study. An open-ended central question leaves a qualitative study open for broad portrayal of the phenomenon by participants

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These questions were posited from Gardner et al.'s (2005) model of authentic leadership. This model encompasses four components of leadership which include: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective. This study was guided by the central research question: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media?

In order to clarify findings, the following subquestions were used in the study:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents manage self-esteem and self-efficacy in the age of social media?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents maintain transparent relationships in the age of social media?
3. How do Missouri public school superintendents practice balanced processing in decision making while living in the age of social media?
4. How do Missouri public school superintendents rely on one's internal moral perspective during the age of social media?

### **Research Setting**

The superintendents selected for this study represent districts from each of the nine Regional Professional Development Center (RPDC) divisions in Missouri. The participants in a study should represent a variety of perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this reason, superintendents from each of the nine geographic regions across the state of Missouri were included in the study. Additionally, participants were selected to represent the varying classifications of school districts by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and DESE; these classifications being rural, urban, and suburban (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020; National

Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). At least two participants from each category were selected. Districts were also delimited based upon student enrollment, only districts with at least 1,500 students eligible for participation.

The study sought to understand how superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media. Thus, superintendents were selected from across the state with varying on the job experiences. Superintendents are expected to fill the role of CEO and wear many hats (Adamson, 2018b; Bjork et al., 2018; Engel, 2020; Klocko et al., 2019; Melton et al., 2019). However, depending upon the location and size of the district, superintendent may be a more central and political figure within their communities (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; Engel, 2020; Fowler, 2019; Henrikson, 2019; Melton et al., 2019). Also, the varying demographics within a district and the financial standing of a district can both have immense impact upon a superintendent's experience.

Participants were sent an email requesting a Zoom meeting. Each research participant willingly accepted their invitation to become a participant in this study. This email included the purpose of the study, participant selection processes, and the topic of the interviews. Each participant was interviewed one time via Zoom. With participant permission, interviews were recorded and Otter.ai transcription service was utilized to allow for better record keeping and thematic coding.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling with specific criterion was used to select participants in this phenomenological study. Purposive sampling is ideal for phenomenological studies (Frechette et al., 2020). When all participants have experienced the same phenomenon, criterion sampling works well (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling allows for

the selection of participants with a rich knowledge, understanding, and experience in the phenomenon being studied (Frechette et al., 2020). The past decade has brought on an exponential increase in social media engagement. However, high rates of superintendent turnover made it unrealistic to find candidates who have held the position for the entirety of the decade. Recent data on superintendent tenure was a challenge to find as Gallup (2017) found the average superintendent tenure is between one and five years. For this reason, three years of experience was chosen to match composition of total population. Participants must have experience in the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The nine superintendents in the study had an average of 6 years in their current position; with an average of 8 total years as a superintendent role. Details of each participant’s experience in their current role and total as superintendent can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Experience*

Participant	Years in Current Position	Overall Years as Superintendent
P1	1	4
P2	12	15
P3	12	17
P4	3	13
P5	4 (assistant supt)	11
P6	2	2
P7	2	2
P8	3	7
P9	18	6

**Selection and Sampling**

An initial email (Appendix A) was sent to all superintendents of schools with enrollment of more than 1,500 students. Based upon the results of the questionnaire,

candidates were filtered by RPDC region and years of experience in their current position. Once potential participants were selected, request for participation in the study was sent via email (Appendix C). Participants were ensured confidentiality of all information and interview data. Key informants can provide relevant and thoughtful communications on a topic and must be comfortable with the researcher (Mills & Gay, 2019). Aliases were used for all participants to ensure privacy and protection of identity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Districts and superintendents were identified by number based upon their corresponding RPDC. Therefore, the district chosen from region 1 is District 1 and the superintendent of that district is Superintendent 1; this method was utilized for regions one through nine.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of superintendents and their ability to conduct themselves as an authentic leader in the age of social media. This study sought to understand how social media influences self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral-perspective of Missouri public school superintendents. Each superintendent had varied levels of social media usage, professional experiences, and opinions of social media. A qualitative phenomenological study allowed the participants to tell their lived experiences of leading their school districts during the age of social media (Peoples, 2021). Phenomenological research seeks to gain common experiences within a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2021). The qualitative research process is fluid and changes as the researcher emerges oneself into the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2019).

Interviews were used to compile the lived experiences of the phenomenon and information needed to complete the research for this study. In-depth interviews are the ideal data collection measure in phenomenological research (Frechette et al., 2020; Greening, 2019; Peoples, 2021). The questions used for the interviews were developed based upon a combination of a central research question and subquestions with additional open-ended questions. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into the lived experiences of how social media influences a superintendent's decision-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed via Otter.ai.

Triangulation of data creates greater validity and reliability within a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During this study, data was collected through interviews, district social media pages, and district policies. Additionally, the researcher journaled personal bias prior to conducting interviews. Data gathering is the process of collecting previous artifacts which assist the researcher in framing the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). Throughout the study, the researcher examined and read each district's social media sites to collect data and themes. Member checking was also utilized to add additional validity to the research, with participants being allowed to review interview transcriptions to verify of their statements. Lastly, the researcher utilized interview transcriptions and personal notes to identify themes between all participants.

Removing participant personal bias of social media was a crucial step in increasing validity of the study. Participants were reminded all questions in the interview referred to social media in the professional manner, as it pertained to their district. The final question of each interview was to gain insight into the participants personal feelings

on social media.

## **Procedures**

Following proposal to the research advisor and committee members, the proposed study was submitted to the Research Review Board of Southwest Baptist University for approval. Upon approval (Appendix D), the researcher contacted potential candidates via email. An initial email (Appendix A) was sent to all superintendents of schools with an enrollment of more than 1,500 students. Based upon the results of the questionnaire, candidates were filtered by RPDC region and years of experience in their current position. Once potential participants were determined, a random selection was made and request for participation in the study was sent via email (Appendix C). Participants were assured confidentiality of all information and interview data; this was ensured through an informed consent form (Appendix B). Key informants can provide relevant and thoughtful communications on a topic. They need to be comfortable with the researcher (Mills & Gay, 2019). Aliases were used for all participants to ensure privacy and protection of identity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to gain data on the candidates' years of experience in their current role. Once the results were compiled and sorted by RPDC, the researcher identified three potential candidates from each region. The participants were sent an email seeking their participation in the study, permission to interview, and a notice of confidentiality. An explanation of the study and its significance were also supplied. If candidate number one declined, candidate number two was contacted, this process was repeated until a candidate from each region agreed to participate. Upon agreement via email, the participants signed a consent form (Appendix B).

The researcher then contacted each participant to schedule interviews via Zoom at

the convenience of the participants. Prior to beginning the interview, the participants were again assured confidentiality and a request was made to record interviews. Once permission was obtained, interview recordings were transcribed via Otter.ai for research purposes. The participants were asked interview questions based on the interview protocols in Appendix C. Additional probing and subquestions were asked within each interview to gain clarity and reduce bias. Qualitative research is intimate in nature. Therefore, the researcher must remain responsive and flexible throughout the research efforts (Mills & Gay, 2019).

The next step within the qualitative research process was to analyze and reference interview data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allowed the researcher to code and group interview responses. Interview transcripts were coded by themes based upon the theory of Authentic Leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005). The researcher was aware the research process is fluid and changes as the researcher emerges oneself in the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2019).

### **Instrumentation**

This researcher sought to gain a better understanding of a superintendent's ability to lead in an authentic manner as posited by Gardner et al. (2005). The complexities of leadership have been compounded due to the onset of social media. The overall intent of the research was to find out how superintendents practice self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective in their daily duties. Qualitative interviews allowed the researcher to connect lived experiences of superintendents from across Missouri. The small sample size gave an insight into the attitudes, practices, and opinions of superintendents across the state of Missouri

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The ideal number of participants in a phenomenological study is eight to 15 (Peoples, 2021).

Phenomenological research aims to gain insight and describe experiences of participants of a phenomenon (Frechette et al., 2020; Greening, 2019; Groenewald, 2004; Peoples, 2021). Thus, the researcher must work to remove all personal biases and focus upon the qualitative data provided via conducted interviews. This is achieved by bracketing; bracketing is the process of identifying the researchers preconceived notions and beliefs and suspending them throughout the research process (Peoples, 2021). This can be achieved by journaling one's beliefs and then comparing to the findings (Greening, 2019). Groenewald (2004) uses the term "bracketing out" (p. 50) to illustrate the ideology the researcher removes opinion and does not take a stance for or against. The researcher journaled personal beliefs regarding the topic at the beginning of the research process to create greater awareness of the researcher's personal biases (Greening, 2019).

Researchers set out to find facts and influences of human behavior. Personal interviews provide insight into lived experiences (Peoples, 2021; Greening, 2019; Groenewald, 2004; Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). Specific interview questions ensured consistency in all interviews (Appendix C), additional probing questions were added as needed. The goal of each interview was to answer the following central research question and subquestions: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media? In order to clarify findings, the following subquestions were also incorporated:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents manage self-esteem and self-efficacy in the age of social media?

2. How do Missouri public school superintendents maintain transparent relationships in the age of social media?
3. How do Missouri public school superintendents practice balanced processing in making decisions while living in the age of social media?
4. How do Missouri public school superintendents rely on one's internal moral perspective during the age of social media?

### **Data Analysis**

It is posited data analysis within a phenomenological study can be dangerous because analysis of data aims to break apart the data. However, in phenomenological research, the idea of bracketing the data is more appropriate. Bracketing can help reduce the researcher's personal biases and views (Groenewald, 2004; Peoples, 2021). By bracketing findings throughout the research process, researchers are able to adjust their personal understanding of a phenomenon (Laverty, 2003). Successful hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, requires both knowledge and open-mindedness on behalf of the researcher (Frechette et al., 2020). Phenomenological researchers must work "to be in the world" of their participants (Frechette et al., 2020, p. 11). Themes were tracked via spreadsheet as a means to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

In qualitative research, the researcher collects non-numeric, descriptive data to gain a better insight into the phenomenon being studied (Mills & Gay, 2019). Effective qualitative studies collect data within the site where the phenomenon is taking place (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By conducting interviews of practicing superintendents throughout Missouri, the researcher was able to gain a strong insight into their lived

experiences of the phenomenon of school district leadership in the age of social media.

Phenomenological research captures the lived experiences of participants.

When a lived experience makes a lasting impression, then it is a true experience (Frechette et al., 2020). In-depth interviews are the ideal data collection measure in phenomenological research (Frechette et al., 2020). Interview transcripts were shared with participants for member checking to verify responses and share any additional thoughts and comments.

While working through the interview data collection process, the researcher must work to delineate units of meaning. This is the process of identifying themes within each participant experience within the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004; Peoples, 2021;). This was done by both listening to interview recordings and analyzing interview transcripts to identify themes. Prior to conducting the delineating of meanings, the researcher journaled his own thoughts and biases to complete the phenomenological process (Peoples, 2021). As themes were pulled from interview data and recorded, the themes were clustered as an attempt to make sense of the significant findings within the interview data (Greening, 2019). Otter.ai also utilizes technology which finds common themes among transcriptions. Utilizing Otter.ai helped in the grouping and coding of responses for final analysis. These results were input into a spreadsheet to track the commonality of each unit of coding. Following the coding of each interview, a thorough analysis of each district's social media sites and district policies was conducted. Any discrepancies between site usage or policy and interview transcripts was noted and shared with participants during the member checking process to allow for clarification.

Interviews and transcript notes were then shared with the participants as a form of

member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This allowed the participants to review their responses and provide any further input. Member checking encourages analysis of meaning between the participant and the researcher (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010). This is also an additional step in working to gain reliability and validity in the research process.

The spreadsheet provided a quantitative viewpoint of the data themes (Peoples, 2021). In order for an idea to be considered an experience by ‘most’ participants the idea had to show up in at least six interviews. If an idea was presented in three to five transcripts, it was labeled as ‘many.’ And any ideas that showed up in interviews but not more than three would be classified as ‘some.’ These various classifications allowed the researcher to create general descriptions of the lived experiences of the phenomenon by participants. This is the final step within the phenomenological research process (Peoples, 2021). This is also known as the describing stage of the research (Greening, 2019).

Throughout this process, the researcher compared findings to his own biases and perceptions of the participants experiences. A reflective journal is an essential component of successful phenomenological research (Frechette et al., 2020). This step was utilized to help reduce researcher bias and also validate the findings of the research. Successful phenomenological studies require both knowledge and open-mindedness on behalf of the researcher (Frechette et al., 2020).

## **Summary**

Chapter Three summarized the research methodology conducted within this study by connecting the research questions, problem statement, methodology, design, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the research and explore their lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell,

2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frechette et al., 2020). The research included interviews with nine different practicing Missouri superintendents as well as their district's social media sites and their district policies. The nine participants represented the nine RPDC regions of the state. The researcher conducted the research by interviewing the participants via Zoom and the interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, an electronic transcription service. Transcriptions helped ensure validity and reliability within the research process. They also assisted in the researcher's efforts to construct themes from the various participants in the data analysis process. Themes and findings from interviews were then compared to field notes and observations of district social media sites and district policies. These observations were used to find and verify any discrepancies in participant responses from interview transcriptions.

Chapter Four includes the findings of the interviews, district social media sites, district policies, and research efforts. The data was triangulated by observations of district social media sites and district policies, comparing findings of themes. Additionally, coding was completed to compare the literature research in Chapter Two, using the lens of Gardner et al.'s (2005) four components of authentic leadership, and allowing participants to review transcription and analysis efforts of the researcher. Chapter Four ends with a conclusion of all findings and any emergent themes. Chapter Five provided a summary of the research problem and contained the interpretation of the researcher's findings in connection to the problem statement and research questions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER IV

### Introduction

Superintendents are expected to fulfill a number of roles in today's world; they are expected to be everything to everyone (F. Davidson, et al., 2019; Engel, 2020). A superintendent is viewed as the CEO of their district (Adamson, 2018b; Bjork et al., 2018; Engel, 2020; Klocko et al., 2019; Melton et al., 2019). They are expected to constantly adapt to social, economic, and political pressures (Engel, 2020; Mitchell, 2019). This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents and how they lead their districts authentically in the social media age. One of the biggest factors influencing decision making by leaders today is social media (Wright & Papa, 2020; Xu & Saxton, 2018). Social media presents a number of challenges for any organization, including the necessity of communicating in quick timely manner, the need for increased transparency, and the need to tailor communication efforts for various demographics (Duoug, 2020; Hope, 2019).

In order to lead their districts effectively, superintendents must build quality, trustworthy, and transparent relationships with all stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Cabellon & Brown, 2017; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Hill & Jochim, 2018; Kotter, 1995; Sanaghan, 2011). These relationships are the currency or capital which allows school leaders to impact change and move their districts forward (Sanaghan, 2011). The foundations to any quality relationship are authenticity and transparency (Harvath, 2013; Melton et al., 2019). Transparent communication is essential to building trust with all stakeholders. Authentic leaders are consistent with their words and their

actions, show an appropriate capacity for their position, and are comfortable as themselves (Bird & Wang, 2011; Gardner et al., 2005). The importance and necessity for authenticity grow as one views the hierarchy within a school district, peaking with the superintendent (Mendoza-Thompson, 2019). An authentic leader leads from the heart with passion and leans on their values (George et al., 2011). The rise in popularity of social media over the last 15-plus years has changed the way superintendents are expected to communicate, collaborate, and connect with their district and community (Burleigh, 2020; Wilhite et al., 2018; Wright & Papa, 2020). Superintendents must establish themselves as authentic leaders by building relationships that are built upon honesty and trust (Mendoza-Thompson, 2019).

Authentic leadership is still a relatively new theory of leadership practice, coming to popularity in the early 2000s amidst numerous corporate leadership scandals (George, 2003; Meza, 2018; Newport, 2017; Peterson, 2019). Gardner et al. (2005) posited there are four main components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner & Cogliser, 2018; Kernis, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Thus, this study sought to better understand how superintendents lead their district authentically, through the lens of Gardner et al. (2005), in the social media age.

Research was conducted by interviewing nine Missouri public school superintendents. Following interviews, transcripts were utilized to identify themes between participants and compare interview results. The literature review findings along with Gardner et al.'s (2005) four components of authentic leadership formed

the interview questions. In an effort to triangulate data, results of the interviews were compared to participants' district social media pages and district policies.

Chapter Four covers research participants and setting, and data analysis, as they pertain to the research question: How do superintendents lead authentically in the social media age? To clarify, the following subquestions were also incorporated:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents manage self-esteem and self-efficacy in the social media age?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents maintain transparent relationships in the social media age?
3. How do Missouri public school superintendents practice balanced processing in making decisions living in the social media age?
4. How do Missouri public school superintendents rely on one's internal moral perspective during the social media age?

### **Data Analysis**

Participant interviews were recorded via Zoom with consent and upon completion were transcribed using Otter.ai. The goal of each interview was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents as they lead school districts during the age of social media. Through Otter.ai, a written transcript identifying potential themes and keywords was created for each interview. Prior to reading transcripts, the researcher reviewed personal journals that were created prior to the interviews as a part of the bracketing process to remove researcher bias (Greening, 2019; Groenewald, 2004; Peoples, 2021). During the initial reading of each interview, the researcher sought to remove any redundant terms such as "uh", "um", and "so" to clean

the data (Peoples, 2021). The data-cleaning process also included making edits as necessary, as Otter.ai transcription is not entirely accurate as it creates transcripts. The initial reading was to gain an understanding of each participant's experience of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). Upon the completion of the first reading and cleaning of the data, transcriptions were sent back to the participant to ensure accuracy as a part of the member-checking process (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). When sending transcripts, participants were instructed to note any discrepancies, and that if the researcher did not hear back, transcripts were considered accurate as written. Participants agreed to this stipulation and no participant replied with corrections.

To allow for more thorough research, the researcher utilized interviews, district policies, and data mining of district social media pages to complete the triangulation process. To better ensure confidentiality, policies and social media sites were labeled by their respective RPDC and associated participant. Following interviews, the researcher collected district policies regarding communication and social media usage. The final step was to data mine each participant's district social media pages.

### **Coding**

A spreadsheet was utilized to track the number of times terms were said by each participant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each Otter.ai transcript listed the themes from the interview; these lists were used to determine common terms between all participants. Transcripts and field notes from interviews were read multiple times as the researcher looked for consistent terms and themes between participants. Otter.ai transcriptions were then combined to search for the number of times these terms occurred within all

interviews. The list of 25 most common terms is included in Table 2. Based upon the terms most frequently used and literature review, themes were developed.

**Table 2**

*Code Terms Used Per Participant in Interview Transcript*

Term	Total	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
District	117	21	4	6	30	6	8	9	17	16
Teacher/Staff	92	6	8	29	25	2	5	9	7	1
Decision	85	5	13	12	13	7	5	13	14	10
Kids	78	5	8	24	10	2	4	9	15	1
Communicate/Communication	66	12	4	18	9	7	5	5	5	1
Community	53	2		5	3	0	5	5	13	11
Facebook	53	4	11	8	8	2	2	11	3	4
Board	52	4	1	4	31	1	1	2	6	2
Education/Educator	48	4	2	9	10	5	1	0	15	2
Parent(s)	44	0	0	6	8	0	5	13	10	2
Positive	41	3	1	2	8	7	6	2	11	1
Trust	39	6	3	3	13	1	2	7	1	3
Twitter	37	2	2	5	4	5	3	5	9	2
Story/Stories	36	5	0	1	13	5	0	4	3	5
Beliefs/Values	35	3	6	0	8	1	2	2	11	1
Covid	29	0	2	1	4	6	5	1	7	2
Student	27	2	3	11	3	1	2	0	4	1
Team	26	4	2	3	8	0	0	2	7	0
Experience	24	0	3	2	9	2	3	2	3	0
Comments	22	1	4	0	3	1	2	2	7	2
Relationship	22	4	0	1	7	3	1	2	4	0
Masks	21	0	2	3	0	2	1	5	8	0
Negative	20	2	1	1	1	2	4	1	6	2
Challenges	17	2	3	2	2	0	4	0	0	4
Honest	16	0	1	0	4	2	1	0	4	4

*Note:* Participants were identified as P and the corresponding RPDC region they represented. For example, the participant representing RPDC 1 was labeled as P1.

Further analysis of data was completed by analyzing the average number of times terms appeared in transcriptions. Top 5 terms were as follows: District, Teacher/Staff, Decision, Kids, and Communicate/Communication. The highest average number of times

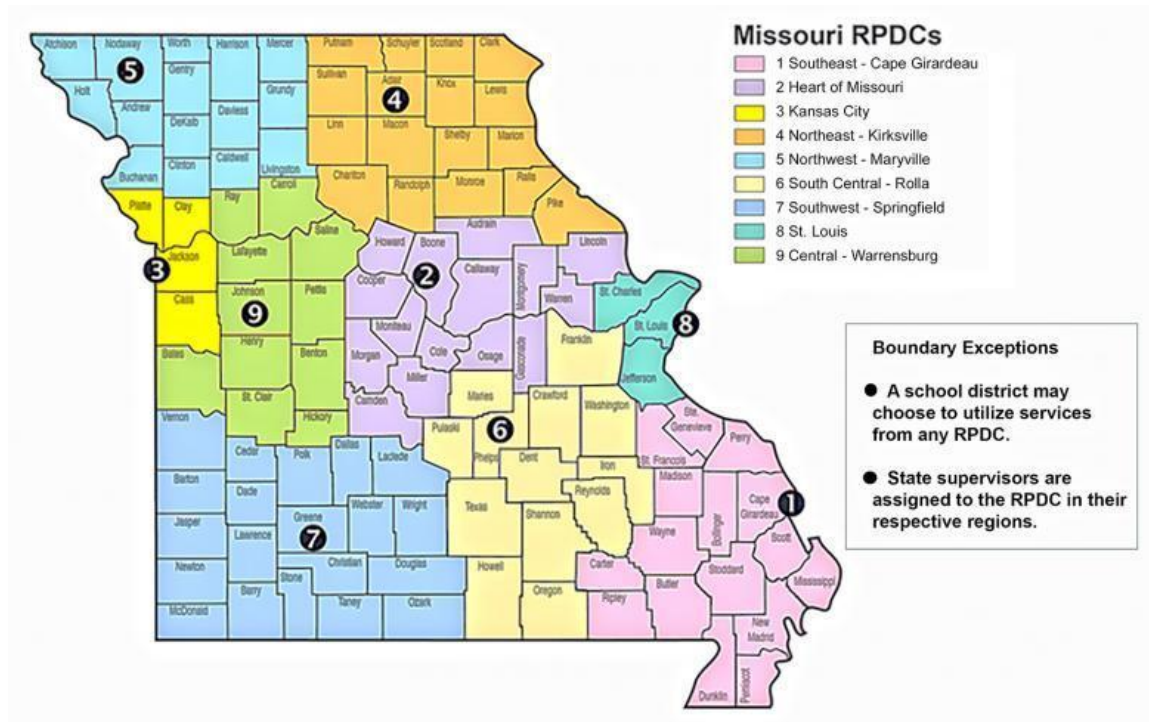
a term appeared was 13, which was “district”, followed by “teacher/staff” and “decision.” The maximum number of times a term appeared in a single interview was 31; the term was “board” in P4’s interview. To better understand the disparity in the qualitative data, the researcher sought to find the term with the greatest disparity between participants; the researcher found the term “teacher/staff” had a standard deviation of 9.34, which was greater than all other terms.

### **Participants**

The researcher utilized purposive sampling, which was based upon clear criteria. Criteria included one public school superintendent from each of the nine RPDCs in the state of Missouri. The superintendent’s district enrollment had to be at least 1,500 students for them to be eligible for the study. In addition, the superintendents represented urban, suburban, and rural districts. The participants in the study included eight practicing superintendents and one assistant superintendent that has been tabbed to take over their current district as superintendent next school year and also had previous experience as a superintendent. The nine participants represented each of the nine RPDCs of Missouri as defined by geographic region and delineated in Figure 1. Each participant was within the guidelines of the study and was purposefully selected (Peoples, 2021). The use of RPDCs helped to gain a better insight into the lived experiences of superintendents from across the state of Missouri.

**Figure 1**

*Missouri Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs)*



*Note.* Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Missouri RPDCs (<https://dese.mo.gov/educator-quality/educator-development/regional-professional-development-centers>).

Potential participants were contacted via email (Appendix A) to solicit their interest in taking part in the research. Within the email was an informed consent link that allowed participants the opportunity to give consent to take part in a Zoom interview. The link also included an opportunity to list times that worked best for each individual. Upon giving consent and agreeing to participate, each participant was contacted via follow-up email communication including a Zoom link for the agreed upon time and date.

The participants of the study represented a broad background of experiences and years within their current position as superintendent. To ensure confidentiality of each participant, they were labeled by their respective RPDC: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8,

and P9 (Table 3). Each participant took part in a Zoom meeting between late April and early May 2021. School leaders were provided the interview protocol and questions prior the Zoom interviews to ensure they were comfortable participating in the research. This helped in building trust between the researcher and participants (Mills & Gay, 2019).

**Table 3**

*Participant Information*

Participant	Experience in Current Role	Current Role	Experience as Superintendent	School District Classification
Participant 1 (P1)	1	Superintendent	4	Suburban
Participant 2 (P2)	12	Superintendent	15	Rural
Participant 3 (P3)	12	Superintendent	17	Suburban
Participant 4 (P4)	3	Superintendent	13	Rural
Participant 5 (P5)	4	Assistant Superintendent	11	Urban
Participant 6 (P6)	2	Superintendent	2	Rural
Participant 7 (P7)	2	Superintendent	2	Suburban
Participant 8 (P8)	3	Superintendent	7	Suburban
Participant 9 (P9)	6	Superintendent	18	Suburban

**Participant Narratives**

Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom upon availability and convenience of participants. All participants completed the informed consent form (Appendix B) prior to their respective interview. Participants gave permission for interviews to be recorded. Recordings were then uploaded to Otter.ai to be transcribed.

The following narrative summarizes each participant's interview.

### ***Participant 1***

Participant 1 (P1) was quick to recognize the power and necessity of social media for their school district, but acknowledged their district was fortunate to have a public relations office to handle everything social media related. They shared they did have a “secret” personal Facebook account that would be very hard for constituents and stakeholders to find; it was primarily used to keep up with family members that were living afar.

When talking about authentic leadership, P1 discussed having morals and values that were grounded in their “why,” stating that why was “that's always been a try to make a difference for the kids and for the staff. And for the community. I think they're all three vital” (P1). The participant shared they believed it was critical to the success of the position for a superintendent to be viewed as authentic. Participant 1 shared this was accomplished through being present in the district, listening to staff and community members, and taking their feedback. Participant 1 shared their self-awareness came from those around them and trusting and listening to the feedback when it was given. The participant shared that social media was utilized for gathering that feedback. The participant was quick to point to morals and using the guide of whether or not something was good for their own children when making a decision that may create a moral dilemma. When talking about transparent relationships, the participant discussed the various groups with which they were connected and met regularly. Participant 1 talked of hopes of utilizing social media to offer more interactions with the community. But, Participant 1 was in their first year in the district so that was still something on their to-do

list.

When discussing social media as a tool, Participant 1 shared the district utilized it to share positive messages and important information, particularly for parents. One example given was an Excellence Award that allowed the district to spotlight staff who were exceeding expectations in their everyday work. Additionally, P1 stated the district was completing a strategic planning process and utilizing social media to collect community input. Both were observed by the researcher within P1's district social media pages. Secondarily, P1's school district followed Missouri School Board Association's (MSBA's) policy guidance and did not have a specified social media policy. The district's public information simply outlined the usage of social media to share information.

### ***Participant 2***

Participant 2 (P2) was in their 29<sup>th</sup> year in education and planned to retire at the end of the 2022 school year. When asked for views of social media, Participant 2 shared

I think social media is very beneficial personally and for organizations for schools, but then also I've seen it used to just destroy people, divide communities and staff and so I think overall, there's a good value and a terrible outcome from it, too.

Participant 2 publicly utilized a Facebook account, though acknowledged it was primarily to keep up with family members. The district utilized Facebook and Twitter to distribute key information and positive messaging for the district. Due to the longevity of their administrative experiences, P2 shared a unique perspective of what school leadership was like before the rise of social media. Participant 2 shared,

“I think back when I started as a principal and we didn't have social media; I think it was easier. Oh, people were more apt to come in and if it was a real issue, people would come in and have a conversation.”

Continuing, P2 said,

Now you've got your keyboard warriors that are doing it all. And you still have to deal with it. So, I do I think social media has made our job much harder. There are different challenges now than 25 years ago.

Participant 2 shared their belief in having roles within their life, and one of those roles was a school administrator. They discussed doing everything possible to be a “good” administrator. The participant shared how important it is to be authentic in a leadership role by saying, “If you're not able to do that, I don't think the role as administrator would be very comfortable” (P2). They went on to say, people will not follow an unauthentic leader. Participant 2 shared an instance when a principal was involved in testing improprieties with the district’s MAP testing. These actions eventually led to the principal being dismissed, but the participant shared the significance of struggling during that time period and the backlash they faced on social media:

So that took a very [heavy toll], it was very emotional, and I received a lot of personal attack with that. But I just tried to stay true to what my values and beliefs were. And that's how you go lay your head on the pillow at night (P2).

Participant 2 shared when making decisions, they are quick to utilize collaboration and discuss the decisions with those that will be affected most. They shared, “You want to get those stakeholders at the table, and have some good conversations regarding that before a decision is made” (P2). These decisions ultimately

fall upon the leader, but asking for input builds credibility with stakeholders. Participant 2 shared of a time when social media was used during their strategic planning process to gain community input.

Participant 2 shared their district utilized social media to share positive happenings within the district and spotlight their staff. This was verified by the researcher as a result of the triangulation process. Comments within the district's Facebook page were mostly positive and congratulatory toward staff members. Participant 2's district also utilized MSBA policies. The district policy on technology stated district social media sites were not a closed forum. Thus, they were not utilized as an open forum and the district has the right to restrict communication within specified channels.

### ***Participant 3***

Participant 3 (P3) was currently in their 12<sup>th</sup> year as superintendent of their district. The participant did not utilize social media other than a Twitter account that was registered as the district superintendent. Participant 3 stated, "I think social media is a valuable tool that we can utilize for schools."

When discussing authentic leadership, Participant 3 quickly pointed to using judgement and a moral compass by doing what's best for kids, stating,

I have lived by that mantra over and over, we have to do what's best for kids. That doesn't necessarily mean what's best for me or for you, as adults, but we've got to do what's best for our students.

When asked how they are able to lead authentically Participant 3 shared the following:

"As a piece of that, it shows you're real. It shows you're human, you're not just a machine, you're not cold, you're, you're caring, your door's open, you care and you want

to respond.”

Participant 3 was quick to share their experiences during the COVID pandemic and how social media was utilized, by saying,

In our experience, as far as the social media piece of it was huge, we did a ton of communicating, I had a Friday update every Friday with all of my staff via social media. We did town halls, with all of the staff, I'd take any question and every question, some not nice, some of them are not easy. Some of them I didn't have an answer for. And I would just come out and say that, but we tried to make sure that everybody was on the same page and heard the same message.

When talking about balanced processing and transparent relationships, Participant 3 shared all the interactions they were able to take part in with internal and external stakeholders through various groups and meetings. They were quick to point out how important face-to-face interactions were to build trust and relationships within the community, stating they had a “ton” of advisory meetings to “take the pulse of a lot of people and see where things are based on that.” These groups varied from middle school student groups to alumni parent groups, and groups of parents of former district graduates.

Regarding social media usage, P3 shared a few instances in which social media created turbulence within the district. The first instance shared was from several years ago, when there were multiple student suicides within the district. Participant 3 stated many people utilized social media to attack the district and its lack of effort to combat bullying, as bullying was said to be the reason for the student deaths. The second instance shared was regarding a time when lack of student performance on statewide assessments

was shared with the public. In an effort of transparency, P3 said the district displayed specific assessment sub scores in which specific demographics scored lower than others.

The intent was to share how the district hoped to make up the achievement gaps.

However, some on social media took it as if the district was not doing enough to serve all students in all demographic groups. Due to much of the backlash and negativity regarding social media, P3 shared they would not utilize social media personally until they retired:

“when I retire one of the first things I’ll do is get Facebook.”

Participant 3’s school district also utilized MSBA policy. Within district board policies were outlined requirements of a communications plan which included social media usage. This policy allowed for the elimination of rumors and misinformation. The district had an additional closed forum policy, which allowed the district to control the communication on their various forum platforms. The researcher found little negativity while researching the participants’ social media pages. Nearly all comments were in a positive manner and congratulatory to those involved in the postings.

#### ***Participant 4***

Participant 4 shared they did not personally use social media much due to the “public scrutiny of public officials and every little thing you put on there.” Participant 4 shared, “I even have high school kids that started trolling me during the pandemic and pulling off my personal Facebook page insinuations that I was one political leaning or another and it just became problematic.” Participant 4 believed in the power of social media to tell a district’s story and know that it has value, but stated it can create a “firestorm.” Since the pandemic, P4’s district has hired a communications coordinator to handle the district’s public relations and social media. The participant was unique in their

experiences, as their first year in their current superintendent position was the 2020 school year. Thus, they had little time to build social credibility prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic and faced considerable backlash during the spring of 2020.

When asked to share their definition of authentic leadership, P4 stated, Authentic to me is as close to meaning genuine. Meaning from the heart, meaning it's based on my own collection of personal beliefs about who I am, what I should be in moments of leadership and being true to myself when I have to act.

Participant 4 went on to say, to be authentic one must have a spiritual connection, a true sense of who one is. They stated “the capacity to self-reflect is a major part of how you develop that identity” (P4). Participant 4 emphasized the importance of “thought partners,” individuals they could share ideas with prior to a decision to ensure the leader was not operating out of bias and making the best decisions for all involved. Participant 4 also shared that social media can be utilized for surveys and opinion collection of families and stakeholders.

Participant 4 shared of times when an employee took messages out of context.

They stated,

People started trolling you looking for things that were just an exaggeration, or a disbelief, or a lack of confidence that someone could and would just tell the truth; what happened in my district was an employee that is still here that within the first six months of a very positive start, it became a grind. Caricatures, misstatements, emails taken out of context and wording fabricated out of emails that while they existed was exaggerated by that person over social media (P4).

This trolling and attacking even came from high school students within the district on

their own social media pages.

Participant 4 shared their district planned to utilize a social media campaign for an upcoming bond election for the upcoming year. Due to the current economic instability, they shared the importance of a well-planned, well-thought campaign to share positive messaging. They stated the campaign will hopefully help change the view of public education by sharing the good their teachers are doing on a daily basis.

Participant 4's district social media pages did not allow for public comment. The page was solely for information dissemination. Many of the postings on the pages were staff recognition and the happenings within the district's classrooms. Additionally, the district's policy manual included that all district technology postings were considered closed forums. Thus, the district could control all commenting and feedback on social media pages.

### ***Participant 5***

Participant 5 (P5) was quick to share they were not big on social media. The participant only started a Twitter account due to the push from their district's communications director; they shared they only used it occasionally. Participant 5 shared their district utilized social media to help the positivity of what's happening within the district.

When asked about authentic leadership, P5 shared a belief in innovation, staying true to doing what's best for kids, and trying to stay caught up with the progression of education. Participant 5 utilized collaboration and the strengths of those around them in their leadership. The participant shared the importance of leaning on others around them to make up for their weakness and allow them to remain authentic to their true self and

not try to be someone they are not. “I think you have to be forthright, you have to be transparent. And people need to understand where you stand” (P5). Participant 5 went on to say every decision had to be made in the best interest of students and leaders must have the courage and moral character to stand by those decisions, even when “you have arrows coming at you.” Participant 5 also shared their district did not have a good relationship with the local media due to the actions of previous leaders; thus, it was even more important for current leadership to practice authenticity and relate to their stakeholders.

Participant 5 shared of experiences leading during the COVID-19 pandemic: “You're kind of building the plane as it's in the air, so to speak. And you have to do a lot of pivoting. And so those decisions were even more important.” They shared the importance of realizing leaders can never please everyone, even stating “you're never going to make 75% happy.” When looking ahead, P5 stated the pandemic was an opportunity to look to the future and how districts can change for the better.

When speaking directly about social media, P5 shared of a time at a previous district in which they served as superintendent and were running a bond campaign. The social media campaign was designed to be authentic and display the needs of the district to the public. They shared some of the authenticity backfired as they did not do a good enough job preparing the public for the current state of some of the facilities. The bond did pass, but it caused turbulence along the way. When observing P5’s district social media, little public interaction could be found, most of which was positive in nature. The district had a closed forum policy allowing them to control what was being said within their social media sites.

### ***Participant 6***

Participant 6 (P6) was in their second year as superintendent of the district, but has spent their entire educational career within the same district. The participant stated there was an expectation of educators and districts to utilize social media for information purposes, and believed it came with good and bad. Participant 6 stated they utilized the district's communications director to handle the interactions of social media, stating "I've been less involved in that than I thought I would be."

When asked to share about authentic leadership, P6 shared "it's leading from who you are and not trying to emulate others. Also, not leading as how you think leaders should lead, rather leaning upon your sense of right and wrong for the district." From a personal perspective, they shared they had two rules: "treat others well and try to do the best in every situation" (P6). Participant 6 shared being authentic establishes credibility and trust, which are vital to the position and leading a district forward, the further stating:

We're in the public eye enough that if you aren't consistent with your leadership, people see through it really quick. I think you lose the ability then to be viewed as the leader of your district, if you don't lead in that way.

From a social media perspective, P6 said "things can get a little messy" with all of the ups and downs – positives and negatives – that come from social media. They shared a leader's social media presence needs to match who they are as a person, as this too can be misconstrued as being unauthentic if it does not. Participant 6 shared the belief during the COVID-19 pandemic that many leaders "got sucked into some of the negative comments on social media and it was difficult." This made it difficult to have a gauge on their entire community's thinking rather than small groups of opinions. Because of this,

they shared the importance of collaboration and having trusting relationships to gain input and feedback on decisions. Participant 6 did share of the power of social media to leverage and promote bond campaigns, stating their district has been able to successfully pass a couple of bond issues.

Participant 6's district social media sites allowed comments. The district responded to some questions or negative comments with factual information. Additionally, district policy included a closed forum policy allowing the district to monitor and control what was said via electronic forums such as social media.

### ***Participant 7***

Participant 7 (P7) shared the belief that social media "is a net negative. However, I would say that I think it can be positive if used in the right way from a school district." Additionally, P7 shared utilizing Twitter personally and had done so for at least 10 years. Participant 7 stated they utilized it to share much of what was happening in the district as a way to "to make sure that we're putting our best foot forward when I post something." From a district perspective, P7 shared the district had a communications director that developed a communications plan and worked with the various buildings in the district to ensure that plan was followed. The participant explained this plan had to become more detailed and regimented following COVID and the need to better communicate with the public. "Generally speaking, Facebook has been a good messenger for us," stated P7.

Participant 7 described authentic leadership as the following:

Not being somebody that you naturally are not and making sure people understand that they (have) got the real you. Sometimes that might be lots of goods, sometimes that might be some bads, too, sometimes that might be some I

don't know. But, making sure that people know that you're human and leading in an authentic manner through the good and the bad.

Participant 7 described their own leadership style as “blue collar” and someone who was willing to do the work along with others. Additionally, P7 went on to say they were not afraid to trust others to do their jobs. They emphasized the importance of allowing staff to feel a sense of autonomy in their roles. This autonomy helps create greater buy-in to the direction of the district and gets rid of the top-down stigma. According to P7, being viewed as authentic is critical to leadership. On the contrary, being seen as unauthentic prevents trust, and without trust you cannot develop meaningful, quality relationships. This trust develops social capital and creates grace for when leaders do make mistakes.

From a social media perspective, P7 examines a situation or decision and attempts to think of the worst that can come up. This includes the viewpoint of social media and what backlash may come from a decision, and then planning to get ahead of any turbulence. Participant 7 also stated, “I would rather err on the side of complete and total transparency than [have] something blowing up in my face and causing many, many parents and community members to lose faith in the district.” Additionally, P7 said the district planned to take an “offensive stance” in the coming years to better promote the positives that take place within their district on a daily basis.

Participant 7's district social media site included numerous comments, most of which were positive in nature. The district did have some interaction to answer questions or provide factual information. The district utilized Facebook to gain parent input on drop-off/pickup options at one building within the district; this posting had an increase in traffic compared to others. The district did not have any wording regarding social media

or its likeness in their Board Policies. Also, its closed forum policy spoke specifically to district-owned technology and was not as ambiguous as others to potentially include social media.

### ***Participant 8***

Participant 8 (P8) talked of the importance of embracing social media as educators. Though many viewed it as all negative, they shared the importance of utilizing it for sharing the positives of a district. The participant utilized social media to share the highlights of their day and the district they were managing. This often included snapshots from classrooms and various educational settings throughout a day. Participant 8 stated,

A picture's worth 1,000 words. I think there's a lot of truth to that. And when you take that picture, and you can magnify that, and you instantly have an audience of a couple of 1,000 people that get to see that.

Participant 8 shared the belief that authentic leadership is being real and leading with your heart. The participant shared,

Yes, you have to use data, you have to make your analytical decisions, but you lead with your heart, and what you know about people, and use that as your filter when you look at kids, what's in their best interest (P8).

Additionally, P8 emphasized the importance of remaining open and honest to ensure being viewed as transparent by their community and parents. There were times that transparency was limited due to personnel reasons. Participant 8 talked about the importance of banking “social capital” for times when being authentic can cause turbulence within the district.

Regarding social media turbulence, P8 spoke specifically of “keyboard warriors,”

the people that are quick to point out mistakes or try to catch the district in a lie. However, P8 stated it is still vital for the district to share the good news of the school district and “tell their story.” Participant 8 shared they had put out surveys to gain feedback on how the district rated leadership performance as superintendent, and then used that information to self-assess. Participant 8 said the school district continuously battled misinformation due to the political nature of their region of the state. Regarding policies and social media sites, the district had a public information policy that included social media. This policy stated that the communication plan should be utilized to share accurate and timely information and combat rumors and misinformation. The district’s social media sites had little commenting or replies; interactions were primarily sharing of posts.

### ***Participant 9***

Participant 9 (P9) was the most experienced school leader that participated in the research effort, having 25 years’ experience in administration. Eighteen of those years were spent serving as a superintendent. The participant shared they were a free speech advocate but were very cautious of social media.

When asked about authentic leadership, P9 shared “genuine, honesty, concise, and without emotional overtones” were the first things that came to mind. They shared a sense of being genuine as coming from their upbringing and various experiences as a school leader. Participant 9 went on to share, “I was advised and learned really fast that just tell the truth. And especially if it's information they can get somewhere else, make sure you talk to them first.” Participant 9 shared further:

If you have the trust of the community, you have a lot of ability to make changes,

and have the community see that as a good thing because they have known you to be trustworthy and have integrity. If you don't, if you're not seen as authentic and genuine, then everything you try to do is generally going to be some form of a battle or perhaps facing lots of pushback.

When asked about social media, P9 shared social media does factor into decision making, stating, “what is this likely to look like when it goes on somebody's social media? And what is likely to result from that?” Participant 9 was the only participant whose district did not employ a communications coordinator or director to assist in managing public relations and social media for the district. Members of the district leadership team were members of various social media groups concerning happenings in the community and they helped keep the participant informed as to what was being said and what was going on in the community regarding the school district and social media. The participant shared of a time when a female student made allegations regarding an inappropriate encounter at school that spread like wildfire. The situation ended up resulting in the school having to ask the local police department to investigate so a third party was involved as the district attempted to maintain credibility with the community. The superintendent shared that social media can be “very corrosive and toxic in certain situations,” thus they did not allow any comments or dialogue on district postings. This was found to be in true during the research of P9’s district social media pages. The district’s board policies could not be found online anywhere.

## **Themes**

Upon the completion of interviews, the researcher began reading transcripts to code various terms and develop themes between participants. This process included

highlighting and annotating the Otter.ai transcripts in order to help the researcher identify themes among participants. Following this step, annotations and notes, district policies and social media sites and usage were analyzed and compiled to identify overarching themes. Throughout this process, two themes were discovered regarding participants' experience as authentic leaders during the social media age. These themes were also verified from findings of the researcher's literature review. The themes developed were a) authenticity is being true to your why and b) social media as a tool.

### ***Authenticity Is Being True to Your Why***

When asked about authentic leadership, most participants ended up referencing being true to their why. They referenced the importance of remembering why they got into education in the first place, which was to do what's best for kids or help others (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8). Many shared that being genuine and honest are two traits that first came to mind (P2, P4, P7, P9). Others stated the importance of being true to yourself and not trying to be someone that you're not (P2, P4, P6, P8, P9). As stated by P2,

I think, again, to go back and being true to yourself and being authentic with what you do. If you're not able to do that, I don't think the role as administrator would be very comfortable. And I don't think that it would last very long. Because if you're not leading by the person who you are, then it's not natural, and people sense that, and they won't follow.

Participant 7 specifically shared of their encounter at the beginning of the 2022 school year and the decision as to whether students should mask upon returning to school from summer break. They spoke of masking as a necessity to keep students in school and believed that students being in class was best. However, there was strong opposition

within the community, as they stated, “And in that situation, being authentic, and doing what was probably right for the school was maybe not the best decision at the time for the district.” Participant 5 backed this thought up saying, “At the end of the day, as long as you keep the focus on the kids, and you do what's best for kids, that's what we're here for, that's our business.” Participant 1 echoed, stating, “I have to justify that it is best for kids, is best for the staff and is best for the community in all of our decisions.” Participant 3 stated they constantly “live by” doing what’s best for kids.

The concept of remaining true to why one chose a profession ties in with Avolio and Gardner’s (2005) authentic leadership vein of both relational transparency and internal moral perspective. If leaders are transparent, matching their work and actions with what is said and done — doing what is best for kids—that is authentic leadership. One must also rely upon internal morals of what is believed to be best for the students of the district.

### ***Social Media as a Tool***

Most participants agreed, social media is a “great” or “vital” tool for school districts to get their message out to stakeholders (P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, P8). However, most also caveated their expressions by saying it also comes with much negativity and must be used properly (P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9). Participants talked about the importance of utilizing social media to get a message out and tell the story of the school district. Most participants rely upon the district’s communications director to monitor and manage the district’s social media presence and then report back to the superintendent. Only one participant, P9, did not have a communications director within the district. Another participant shared their district was “forced” to hire a communications director following

the COVID-19 shutdown to help navigate and manage the district's social media presence and spread the positive message of the district (P4). As P4 stated in regard to social media,

[Social media] can be so superficial, because no one wants to read the depths of what the reasoning is, that's boring. If you can't do it in a sound bite, you're in trouble. And that has forced us in our district now to hire a communications coordinator to respond in the moment because it becomes an immediate firestorm.

Most participants talked about the importance of telling their district's story (P1, P4, P5, P7, P8). If leaders are not utilizing social media to control the narrative, then someone else will. And even when using social media to tell the story, those stories often get twisted into half-truths (P2, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9). Some referenced keyboard ninjas that dispel false information from behind the keyboard (P2 & P4). Another, P7, stated they would be going more on the offensive with social media to help spread positivity and share the good within their district. As P8 shared, "A picture's worth 1,000 words." They expanded by adding, "And when you take that picture, and you can magnify that, and you instantly have an audience of, you know, a couple of 1,000 people that get to see that." The concept of utilizing social media to tell a district's story and gain better control of the narrative was prevalent in the literature review. Just as many participants shared, the hesitancy to rely upon social media but understanding it as a necessity was also found within the literature review.

As noted in the literature review, superintendents are hesitant of social media due to the backlash and misinformation that comes from the various sites (Aiken, 2015; Burleigh, 2020). However, superintendents are quick to realize its necessity for the

purpose of information sharing for a school district. Seven of the nine participants' school districts have a policy regarding technology resources and the district website being a closed forum. It is yet to be determined if social media would fall within these descriptors.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by a central research question and four subquestions through which the researcher sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents leading their school district during the social media age. The questions were derived based upon Avolio and Gardner's (2005) authentic leadership theory. Each research question was supported by interview data from participant interviews, as well as data from district policies and social media sites.

Ideas that were present in at least six interview transcripts were labeled as "most". Ideas presented three to five times were labeled as "many", and any ideas that were present in less than three interviews were labeled as "some". These classifications gave general descriptions of the lived experiences of the phenomenon by participants.

The central research question was this: How do superintendents lead authentically in the social media age? Within this question, four subquestions were used to determine how superintendents maintain authenticity while leading their school district. The subquestions centered around Avolio and Gardner's (2005) four tenets of authentic leadership: which are self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective.

*Self-Awareness* The first question was directed at how superintendents maintain self-awareness while leading in the age of social media. Authentic leaders are aware of one's ideal self and real self, knowing the difference between what they desire their purpose to be and how those around them actually view them (Gardner & Coglisier, 2018). The researcher utilized open-ended interview questions to gain an understanding of how each participant maintained and practiced self-awareness while leading within the social media age.

Many participants (P2, P3, P7, P8, P9) stressed the importance of face-to-face interactions with internal and external stakeholders in their efforts to maintain self-awareness. These interactions and conversations allow leaders to gain a better feel for how their leadership is perceived within their district, assisting in gaining credibility within the school district. If superintendents are seen in the buildings, in the classroom they are seen as caring about instruction and academics. Participant 2 even emphasized the need to go as far as scheduling time specifically in their calendar to get into the buildings of the district to interact with staff. Participant 3 held various advisory meetings. These ranged from current students, staff members, community members, and even an alumni parent group of former district graduates. These groups allowed the participant to interact with various groups and share the good of the district and also gain their feedback and hear the voices of the community. Participant 9 talked about the importance of being seen at school events and interacting with the various stakeholders that were involved in the various types of school activities. As Participant 9 stated, "I work the room... to greet and see everyone" and get a "feel" for what they have to say about the district. Participant 5 shared the importance of allowing those in a meeting to

share their true thoughts and ensure members are comfortable in disagreeing and sharing their personal opinions.

Participants discussed the importance of strong relationships within the district and community. Participant 7 discussed having two trusted individuals within the district leadership team they placed “great trust in” and with whom they were able to discuss decisions before they were made. The participant also talked about how connected these two were on social media and that they could rely upon these two individuals to give them feedback regarding what was happening and being said on social media. The various advisory boards that Participant 3 held ensured they were connected with several different groups within the community. Having these relationships with a diverse group of stakeholders ensured the superintendent was able to gain broader feedback from the district. They relied upon these groups “to get an idea of where things are.” Honest and open relationships lead to a second tenet of authentic leadership, which was found throughout the literature review - relational transparency.

Many participants discussed not allowing social media be the only source of feedback as they worked to gain greater self-awareness in their leadership (P4, P6, P7, P8, P9). Each discussed gaining the feedback of social media but stressed it cannot be the only tool of feedback. As Participant 7 said, “The day I start governing by Facebook or social media, I’m quitting. I’m done.” Participant 7 talked about not being completely oblivious to what was being said but stressed it has to be ignored many times. Participant 8 shared, “I’m not trolling groups on social media. I always try to get out and see people.” Participant 8 was the only participant to state they utilized social media to put out surveys on their own job performance; all others stated it was used for feedback

regarding the district as a whole. These findings corroborated the second theme from the researcher's findings, which was using social media as a tool. Participants acknowledged using social media as one of many tools to gain feedback from their districts and communities, but none said it was their main source.

***Relational Transparency*** The second question intended to gain an understanding of how Missouri superintendents maintained transparent and honest relationships with the numerous stakeholders within their district. Transparent leadership creates greater buy-in within an organization. Transparency is the bedrock to a strong following (Gardner et al., 2005; Harvath, 2013).

Most participants reiterated the importance of being visible and accessible to those in the district (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9). Participant 4 discussed getting in front of various civic groups to have conversations regarding the school district and sharing the positives that are happening. Participant 6 talked about talking to individuals on a "personal level." Participant 6 also discussed the importance of being seen at community events and conversing with individuals while at these events. Participant 8 shared the importance of having "visibility with a purpose." They discussed the importance of making connections with individuals and finding common ground. Meeting individuals where they are and having real, personable conversations to let them know you care was prevalent in the literature review.

Participants shared the necessity of being honest and open with others when interacting and having conversations. As Participant 2 said, "You try and be an open book as much as you can," meaning one must be open and honest with those around them, as much as possible, remaining true and authentic to one's self when having those

interactions and conversations. Participants 3 and 9 emphasized the importance of sharing the factual, truthful information the first chance it is present. This will help gain credibility; if constituents have to get the full story elsewhere, then that is going to hinder the relationship. Genuine and credible relationships were supported within the literature review.

The findings from this subquestion verified both themes found in the research, being true to your why and using social media as a tool. As participating superintendents spoke of being genuine and honest, each also noted remaining true to their why: why they chose a career in education and doing what's best for kids. These leaders also spoke of the importance of being visible and accessible throughout their district; this is not possible if social media is relied upon too heavily.

***Balanced Processing*** The third subquestion of this research revolved around the concept of balanced processing while making decisions. Balanced processing is the idea of being able to effectively evaluate a decision and ensure that one is not operating out of bias and is able to analyze the situation from multiple angles (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Superintendents must make certain they are making the best decision for the entire district at all times.

When making decisions and working to gain various viewpoints, all participants discussed the importance of gaining input from multiple individuals, particularly, those that will be affected by the decision (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9). Participant 2 discussed the importance of “getting those people at the table” to have discussions and gain input prior to a decision. As Participant 4 said, gaining this input is “easier inside,” meaning it is often easier to gain this input and feedback from internal stakeholders such

as staff and faculty. Participant 4 went on to give the example of interviewing every middle school teacher as they went through the process of hiring a new middle school principal. The participant talked about the importance of gaining the input of the staff, but also working to establish greater credibility with each group. Participant 8 shared they discussed many decisions with the school board president to gain their input and viewpoint as the board president was connected across many groups within the community. The participant shared they may not always make a decision that was in alliance with the president, but they still took the time to gain their input. As Participant 9 said, “We’re not going to make a decision about the baseball field without the baseball coach.” The ability to better see all sides of a decision and gain collective input was found throughout the literature review. Participant 7 shared they frequently held seminars to share an update of the district to the community for about 30 minutes and this was followed up by an open-mic session where anybody could ask questions. This allowed the superintendent to hear from the community and gain a better insight into the current perceptions of the district. Participant 9 shared they created open-mic-night sessions while running a bond campaign in 2020.

Some participants shared they utilized social media and open-mic-night opportunities to gain community insights while going through the district’s strategic planning processes (P1, P2, P4, P8). Social media allows the district to reach a greater audience and can serve as a data collection tool. Others shared of utilizing social media to gain insights while running bond campaigns (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9). These are examples of using social media as a communication tool for their school district, which

was verified by the research themes as well as the researcher's findings in the literature review.

***Internal Moral Perspective*** The final research question revolved around the idea of how leaders rely upon their internal morals while leading. Morals provide individuals with an inner compass (Waida, 2021). Leaders must be able to stand upon their morals for the greater good and be able to handle criticism to promote success for all students (Mitchell, 2019).

Most participants talked about doing what is best for kids and basing decisions off of what is best for kids (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8). When looking at things from a moral perspective, leaders spoke of being sure to remember why they got into education and making a difference for kids. As Participant 1 stated, "We have to assure that our morals and values are grounded. And that our purpose for why we went into education, why we signed up to be leaders stays true." Participant 1 went on to say, "is it something I stand for?", meaning is the decision something they can agree with and has kid's best interest at heart. Participant 5 stated, every decision that is made has to be made in the best interest of students, and "you have to have moral character in order to do that." Participant 4 talked about the importance of being courageous to stand upon a decision even when facing backlash. These tough decisions are often made with one's inner morals at hand. Doing what is best for students tied back to the why of many participants; this corroborates the research theme found by the researcher.

Participants 1, 4, and 8 all spoke to their spiritual or religious beliefs when considering their internal morals. Each spoke of considering how a decision or situation may align with their personal "beliefs." However, they were quick to point out that was

not the only guiding force when making a decision, rather it was something they considered during the process. This was supported within the literature review (Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Participant 2 shared a time they were attacked on social media over a decision. They said, “I just tried to stay true to what my values and beliefs were, and that’s how you go lay your head on the pillow at night.” Participants 1, 2, 7, and 8 all talked about examining how a decision will affect their community as well as their district (P1, P2, P7, P8). As Participant 6 noted, the loud voices of social media do not always represent the greater community. Participant 7 shared they examined a situation and how it would be handled and tried to look at it through the lens of social media to see how it would be portrayed. He went on to say social media does not dictate decisions, rather this process allows them to try and get ahead of any potential backlash or issues.

### **Summary**

The role of school superintendent has drastically changed throughout its history. Today’s superintendents are forced to wear the hats of CEO, instructional leader for their district, and public information officer (Adamson, 2018b; Bjork et al., 2018; Engel, 2020; Klocko et al., 2019; Melton et al., 2019). Few jobs have higher expectations with such little trust as the position of school superintendents. The rise of social media has only compounded this pressure and distrust. Little research has been conducted on how superintendents lead their district’s authentically while managing the pressures and opportunities of social media.

This phenomenological study sought to better understand how Missouri public school superintendents practice authentic leadership in their daily roles as school district

leaders. This study was guided by Avolio and Gardner's (2005) four tenets of authentic leadership; these four tenets helped guide the research through the research questions. Throughout the research and data analysis process, the researcher was able to find two overarching themes: authenticity is being true to your why and social media as a tool. These first thematic findings corroborated much of the findings within the literature review regarding authentic leadership; leaders must be true to their why and genuine in their work (Avolio et al., 2005; Burleigh, 2020; Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner & Cogliner, 2018). Also, social media is a necessary and powerful tool for school districts, when used appropriately. The more districts can embrace their power in a positive manner, the better they will be able to address and communicate with their districts (Mamenta, 2019; Kirby, 2020; Wilhite et al., 2018).

Chapter Five concludes the study by providing in-depth discussion and interpretation of findings based upon interview data, district policies, and social media sites. Additionally, Chapter Five will cover the findings of the research through the lens of Avolio and Gardner's (2005) framework of authentic leadership, as well as examine the literature review and the responsibilities of superintendents. Furthermore, the researcher will provide recommendations for future research. Lastly, implications for professional practice based upon the findings of this research effort will be shared.

## CHAPTER V

### Introduction

During the early 2000s, multiple corporate scandals increased the scrutiny of leaders across the country (George, 2003; Meza, 2018; Newport, 2017; Peterson, 2019). Avolio and Gardner (2005) posited four tenets of authentic leadership: self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internal moral perspective. Because leadership is an ambiguous term (Murari & Mukherjee, 2021), these four tenets of authentic leadership provided the lens and framework for this study. Superintendents must be astute in their leadership presence, all the while attempting to harness the power of social media for the betterment of their district (Gearhart & Maben, 2019; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019). Appropriate usage of social media can allow superintendents to build trust and offer transparency to their district (Aiken, 2015; Cox, 2012; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019; Schillinger, 2019).

The researcher set out to better understand the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents during the age of social media. As the demands and scrutiny of superintendents increase, the need for authenticity in their leadership is greater than ever (Bell, 2021; Engel, 2020; Mitchell, 2019). Eight Missouri superintendents and one current assistant superintendent were interviewed by the researcher utilizing open-ended questions centered around Avolio and Gardner's (2005) four tenets of authentic leadership. The participants represented rural, suburban, and urban district across the state of Missouri. Additionally, each participant represented one of the RPDCs across the state. This study sought to fill the gap in research regarding authentic leadership in the position of public school superintendents while managing

social media within their communities and districts.

This study was guided by a central research question: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media?

In order to clarify findings, the following subquestions were also incorporated:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents manage self-esteem and self-efficacy in the age of social media?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents maintain transparent relationships in the age of social media?
3. How do Missouri public school superintendents practice balanced processing in making decisions while living in the age of social media?
4. How do Missouri public school superintendents rely on one's internal moral perspective during the age of social media?

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of superintendents and their ability to conduct themselves as authentic leaders in the age of social media. The researcher sought to understand how Missouri superintendents maintain authentic leadership while leading during the age of social media. Social media has vastly changed the world giving the ability to disseminate information in an instant, both good and bad. Successful superintendents must be able to communicate effectively to navigate the politics within their district (Melton et al., 2019).

Chapter Five will include conclusions of the study and the researcher's findings, including the limitations and methods of research utilized by the researcher. Additionally, the chapter will provide implications for practitioners within the field. Lastly, the researcher will give recommendations for future research.

## **Summary of Findings**

The study had one central research question with four subquestions regarding Avolio and Gardner's (2005) authentic leadership theory. The questions were developed with the intent to better understand the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents during the age of social media. In order to gain an understanding of these experiences, the researcher conducted interviews of eight practicing Missouri superintendents and one assistant superintendent who was recently hired to become the next superintendent of their district. The researcher utilized a phenomenological study to better understand the lived experiences of participants (Peoples, 2021). The phenomenon of this study was leading school districts during the age of social media.

Limitations of this study were as follows:

- Participants' answers may not have been completely transparent, honest, or accurate.
- Researcher and participant biases were a possibility in qualitative interviews.
- Little research has been conducted on authentic leadership at the school district level.
- Demographics and job experience of participants varied.
- Participants' feedback may have varied based upon on-the-job experience and various events taking place in their districts.
- The nature of personal interviews created an issue of consistency.
- Possible inconsistencies in the interviewees' definition of authentic leadership and application to their role as superintendent.

- Additionally, the age of social media was defined as 2005 to present (Ahmad, 2018; Jones, 2021; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Samur, 2018).
- An unintended limitation to the study was all participants were of the same gender.

Participants were interviewed via Zoom at their convenience. With participant permission, each interview was recorded and then uploaded to Otter.ai to be electronically transcribed. Each transcription was then coded for themes and shared with each respective participant as a part of the member-checking verification process. When sending transcripts, participants were instructed to note any discrepancies, and that if the researcher did not hear back, transcripts were considered accurate as written. Participants agreed to this stipulation and no participant replied with corrections. Through reading, highlighting, and annotating, themes were developed. Following the development of themes from transcripts, the researcher began the triangulation process by examining participants' district policies regarding social media and its usage. Additionally, within the triangulation process, the researcher examined and mined district social media sites to examine participants' district sites and how they were utilized and how communication was conducted with other site users. Throughout this process, the researcher's journal was referenced to minimize bias.

Themes developed from interview transcripts were verified through the triangulation process as well as compared to the findings of the literature review. The first theme found from the research was authenticity is being true to your why. Participants spoke of the importance of being viewed as genuine, honest, open, and authentic in leadership duties as superintendents. As participants spoke of being authentic

and true to themselves while leading a school district, participants kept coming back to one overall key point: making sure they were true to why they chose a career in education. And that was to make a difference and a positive impact for students. Thus, participants spoke time and time again about doing what is best for kids. Multiple participants stated the need to remind others that the premise for a decision was not to do what was best for adults or gain a majority approval, rather to operate within the thinking of how students could be helped and provided the best learning opportunity for all. Participants spoke of the backlash that can stem from doing so, particularly when it relates to social media.

The second theme developed from the research effort was social media is a tool. This means the participants understood the power and necessity of social media, but did not operate solely on the basis of what is said or will be said on social media. Participants spoke of the importance of appropriate utilization of social media as an informational tool and telling the story of districts. However, each participant spoke of the importance of accessibility, visibility, and face-to-face interactions within their districts and communities. This was found throughout the literature review conducted by the researcher.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this research was to better understand the lived experiences of Missouri superintendents during the age of social media, thus a qualitative phenomenological study was chosen. There is a gap in research on the connection between authentic leadership by school superintendents and social media. Phenomenological studies aim to understand the lived experiences of participants within

a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Frechette et al., 2020; Peoples, 2021). These studies allow the researcher to associate individual experiences with universal understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was guided by the central research question: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media? This was followed by four subquestions centered around Avolio and Gardner's (2005) authentic leadership theory and its four tenets. The subquestions focused on self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internal moral perspective.

Public school superintendents are expected to fill numerous roles, including CEO, CFO, and public relations for their districts (Bjork et al., 2018; M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Henrikson, 2018; Wilhite et al., 2018). These demands, coupled with accountability measures, have increased the scrutiny and politicization of the position (Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Melton et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2019). Social media scrutiny of public school officials, particularly school superintendents, was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. School officials were left with little guidance and no peers to turn to for guidance; couple this with the scrutiny and misinformation power of social media, and school leaders were left with an uphill battle. Social media has increased the demands for quicker and more transparent communication efforts from school districts and officials (Duoug, 2020; Hope, 2019).

Participants were quick to note the negative powers of social media but noted the importance of utilizing it appropriately on behalf of their districts (Burleigh, 2020; Cox, 2012; Duoug, 2020; Obiata et al., 2021; Shipley, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Most participants had very little personal usage of social media, noting that a majority of that

usage was on behalf of the superintendent position and the necessity to do so. All but one participant had a district employee dedicated to communications in the form of a communications director or specialist. These individuals were responsible for the planning and content that was published via social media on behalf of the school districts. Participants noted that most individuals had autonomy in the content that was created and posted. It was unexpected to hear how uninvolved most participants were in their district's communication efforts with their communities. However, the communication directors were in constant communication with the superintendents regarding what was being said on the district social media sites as well as other groups and pages within social media. Many participants noted the district utilized offensive strategies typically by creating new content to address any direct misinformation. This was done rather than engaging in direct conversation or argument with other individuals on social media. One participant noted that in the future their district will become much more "offensive" in all postings to share the good news and happenings within the district (P7). This feeling of needing to tell a district's story is in line with the researcher's findings in the literature review (Aiken, 2015; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019; Sanfelippo, 2021). By working to build stronger communication channels with communities and with numerous stakeholders via social media, superintendents are able to offer transparency and build quality relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Many participants noted they had or were currently utilizing social media in strategic planning processes for the future vision of their district. Leaders noted the ability to quickly gain feedback and input from stakeholders within the districts and also communicate various pieces of information regarding the planning process. This ties into

what was found in the literature review regarding superintendents being visionary leaders (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Capullo, 2021; M. Curry & Wolff, 2017; Decman et al., 2017; Engel, 2020; Wilhite et al., 2018). The process of gaining input prior to making decisions falls in line with Avolio and Gardner's (2005) tenet of unbalanced processing. This is the practice of ensuring that a leader is not basing their decision on personal bias, rather on the greater good of their organization (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

All participants were quick to note the importance of remaining grounded in their why, with it being the reason they chose a career in education, and that reasoning was to make a difference and positive impact for children and students within their districts (S. Davidson & Butcher, 2019; F. Davidson & Hughes, 2020; Mitchell, 2019). This thought process ties to the concept of being true to one's self (Gardner et al., 2005; Harter, 2002). Participants spoke of the importance of ensuring that a decision was in line with what was best for kids and having the courage and morals to stand upon that decision and not be swayed by the political nature of being a public school leader (P4, P5). As one participant noted, the past 4-5 years have brought on a great increase in public school scrutiny. This has only been fueled by social media and "keyboard warriors" (P4; Gardner & Cogliser, 2018; Schillinger, 2019; Stieglitz et al., 2018). Additionally, P7 stated during the COVID pandemic their district had to make a decision that was likely not the best decision for the district or community but was the best decision for kids at the time. That decision was to begin the school year with masks in order to help keep students in school. Many participants noted when a decision is made, when appropriate, there are discussions regarding what the backlash may or may not be on social media and the communications person will develop plans and strategies to combat any negativity or

backlash. It was somewhat unexpected how candid participants were in acknowledging how much forethought goes into communication efforts to minimize backlash.

The concept of basing a decision upon who is impacted ties back to Shapiro and Gross' (2013) ethical decision-making model and the justice of care. Within the ethic of care, the decision maker must look at who will be most impacted by the decision and how the decision will affect that group. Making a decision based upon who is impacted is very much in line with what many participants stated in their decision-making process.

Superintendents must always do what is best for students. As P3 shared,

I have lived by that mantra over and over, we have to do what's best for kids. That doesn't necessarily mean what's best for me or for you, as adults, but we've got to do what's best for our students. I also preface that and also what's best for the school organization, as a whole, as a school organization it is here for kids. And so authentic leadership to me is really looking at it from that lens of what do you truly believe is of most importance, not necessarily what the news media might be telling you, or what one interest group might be banging on your door about, but really trying to do what's best for the for the whole organization.

This ties back to the tenet of balanced processing with Avolio and Gardner's (2005) theory of authentic leadership. Also, as found by Waida (2021), leaders must ensure they are not sacrificing one part of their organization for another.

### **Professional Implications**

This qualitative phenomenological study provided insights into the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents as they lead their districts during the age of social media. Little research has been conducted on how leaders remain

authentic in their leadership practice while attempting to manage and harness the power of social media. With 3,600,000,000 users worldwide, social media is woven into the fabric of our society (Clement, 2020). Thus, superintendents and school districts must have dedicated adequate resources and time to ensuring districts are utilizing social media appropriately to communicate with stakeholders and community members. Many local newspapers are no longer in production, thus communities turn to social media to remain up to date on the happenings in their communities (Lavergne, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018; Zhu & Liu, 2021).

Today more than ever, superintendents are tasked with ensuring communities are informed and aware of the happenings within the school districts. The power of social media allows stories to spread like “wild fire” (P9). Thus, school districts must work to get ahead of potential breaking news or issues within districts. This can be done by developing plans and strategies for effectively communicating with external stakeholders in a timely manner. As found in the literature review, when constituents are disconnected from the school district they are more likely to become adversaries (Poynton et al., 2019). When utilized appropriately to make connections and earn trust, social media can create a greater sense of transparency and support within a community (J. Hughes, 2018; Lavergne, 2017; Schillinger, 2019). However, as noted by many participants, superintendents should not lead solely based upon social media and its happenings. Just because there are upset or angry individuals within a faction of social media does not mean that is the feeling of the entire community. Nor will that faction’s wants always be in the best interest of students and the school district. Superintendents must work to become more comfortable with and increase their knowledge of the workings of social

media. This was supported in the researcher's literature review findings (Aiken, 2015; J. Hughes, 2018; Mamenta, 2019; Sanfelippo, 2021).

Superintendents face stressful tasks and decisions on a daily basis. This stress can only be compounded when there is disconnect and a lack of trust within communities and districts. Thus, superintendents must ensure they are leading authentically and in a trustworthy manner. This can be achieved in many ways, but the best way is to ensure that their words match their actions and remain open and transparent (Gardner et al., 2005; Tran et al., 2020). Numerous participants spoke of the importance of being visible and available to stakeholders and communities; this ensures better connections with all parties. By being better connected and forming relationships, leaders are better able to gain an understanding of the wants and needs of all groups. These relationships are also vital to the trust building process, and as research shows, without trust there is little action within an organization (Gardner et al., 2005; Poynton et al., 2019). This level of trust is especially vital in the board-superintendent relationship (Bridges et al., 2019). As research and participants stated, this trust-building process is continual and requires great effort (Hoerr, 2017).

Participants also discussed the importance of having people around them who are trusted individuals to go to for feedback prior to making a decision. For many, this was fellow central office administrators or building principals within the district. Some even had trusted and well-connected community members they would seek feedback from prior to making decisions. All participants spoke of the importance of having these trusted individuals who were willing to provide open and honest feedback as a part of the balanced processing portion of the authentic leadership; it helped ensure not all decisions

were made out of personal bias.

By ensuring one's words and actions align, leaders are viewed as honest and genuine. As many participants stated, if a person is not authentic in their leadership then success is not likely in the position of school superintendent. Thus, leaders must have the courage and moral character to stand upon a decision when the belief is, it is in the best interest of the district and its students. The political nature of the position has made this much harder to do so, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

School leaders must ensure they are well connected and work to earn the trust of their communities and district. This is vital when it comes to making tough decisions and working to maintain community support of a school district. By working to adequately harness the positive powers of social media, superintendents and districts can better inform and connect to the communities. However, the negativity and misinformation that comes with social media can never be completely eradicated; there are still many positives that come from using social media appropriately.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This phenomenological study sought to better understand the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents as they led districts in the age of social media. While there is still little research regarding social media's impact upon school leadership, there is plenty of room for various studies to better understand this relationship. This qualitative study utilized open-ended research questions developed by the researcher, thus a quantitative or mixed methods study could be conducted utilizing the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed by Avolio, Gardner, and Walumbwa (2007). A mixed methods study would allow the researcher to compare the findings of the

questionnaire to the self-perceived authenticity of superintendents. Secondly, this study only included interviews with superintendents; a study could be mirrored, expanding the scope of interviews to include various stakeholders within a school district such as employees, board members, or community members. Additionally, the researcher delimited the study to districts with a total enrollment of at least 1,500 students; further studies could be conducted on districts of smaller size. Lastly, a study could be conducted focusing primarily upon the COVID-19 pandemic, social media, and school leadership. A study examining the specific experiences during and post pandemic would add value to the field.

Another topic for research would be to examine how districts utilize social media for their strategic planning development and implementation. Many participants mentioned utilizing social media as a tool to gain feedback and give stakeholders a voice in the district's plan development. A study analyzing how the differing voices of social media were considered while developing a plan would be worthwhile and helpful to other superintendents and districts as they work to do the same. There is much research on strategic planning initiatives and processes, but little regarding social media.

Further research is needed in the preparation of superintendents to handle social media and appropriately utilize its power to the districts advantage. Superintendents need to be well-versed in the workings of social media and how to develop adequate communication plans to reach all stakeholders. Most participants admitted utilizing a communications person or department to handle their social media content. But a study could focus upon how a communication plan is developed and what outcomes are expected. With greater training, superintendents could better utilize social media as a

two-way communication tool and reach greater audiences. It was unclear from this research as to how involved each superintendent was in this process within their district. Additionally, this study could be framed to compare districts with and without communications personnel. Another option would be a study of this nature could involve the superintendent evaluation process and to what degree superintendents are expected to be involved in the communications process, if communications personnel are in place.

Lastly, a study could be conducted on school board member social media usage. A qualitative study could examine various school board members' usage of social media and how they utilize various information within their role as a school board member. Board members could share experiences in utilizing social media to share happenings, collect public comment, and communicate with the community regarding the district.

## **Conclusions**

As social media usage increases (Clement, 2020), superintendents must learn to harness the communications powers that are presented. There is large mistrust in leadership (George, 2003; Meza, 2018; Newport, 2017; Peterson, 2019). Superintendents can leverage social media's powers to better connect to their community and earn the trust of stakeholders. By displaying a level authentic leadership and remaining true to doing what is best for students, these leaders can build more meaningful, impacting relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Decman et al., 2017; Hill & Jochim, 2018; J. Hughes, 2018; Melton et al., 2019).

This qualitative phenomenological study focused upon Avolio and Gardner's (2005) theory of the authentic leadership. Specifically, the study sought to better understand how Missouri public school superintendents remained authentic in their

leadership during the age of social media. Avolio and Gardner's theory includes four-tenets, on which the researcher based the subquestions: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internal moral perspective. The researcher set out to understand the lived experiences of nine Missouri superintendents as they led their districts and worked to manage social media.

This study was guided by one central research question and four subquestions. That central question was: How do superintendents lead authentically in the age of social media?

In order to clarify findings, the following subquestions were also incorporated:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents manage self-esteem and self-efficacy in the age of social media?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents maintain transparent relationships in the age of social media?
3. How do Missouri public school superintendents practice balanced processing in making decisions while living in the age of social media?
4. How do Missouri public school superintendents rely on one's internal moral perspective during the age of social media?

In order to answer these questions, the researcher conducted qualitative open-ended interviews via Zoom. Each interview followed specific protocol and questions (Appendix C). Interview questions were developed based upon the findings of the literature review by the researcher. With the permission of participants, interviews were recorded and then transcribed through Otter.ai, an electronic, web-based transcription service.

When analyzing the transcripts, two overall themes were developed in relation to

the literature review. Those themes were (a) *authenticity is being true to your why* and (b) *social media as a tool*. Participants were quick to note that in order to remain authentic in leadership and genuine to who they were, they had to remain grounded in their why, which was the reason they chose a career in education – to impact students. Next, participants were quick to note the importance of social media for their district. Yet, they stated they did not, nor would they ever, lead solely based upon social media and its feedback. Participants noted social media was a vital tool to share the happenings with the district and gives school districts a chance to tell their stories. Practicing and future superintendents can look to these findings as they attempt to lead their districts in an authentic manner while managing the powers of social media.

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## Appendix A

### Email Communication

Hello,

My name is Gage Tiller. I am a doctoral student working on my final requirements for the Ed.D. in Educational leadership at Southwest Baptist University. I am currently working on my dissertation titled “Leading Authentically: The school superintendency in the age of social media.” The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Missouri public-school superintendents as they attempt to lead their school districts authentically in the age of the social media. Social media brings out numerous opportunities for communication and collaboration but also presents a number of challenges leaders. This research sought to understand how superintendents practiced self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internal moral perspective while leading their district.

At this time, my research proposal has been accepted and approved by my research committee at the RRB at Southwest Baptist University. I am in my ninth year in education and an active social media user, I have taken precautions to remove any researcher biases. I am seeking to interview you for approximately 45 minutes about how you practice authentic leadership in your district while managing social media and the opportunities and challenges that social media presents. You will be one of nine Missouri public-school superintendents interviewed as a part of this research. Each of the nine participants will represent one of the nine RPDC geographic regions of Missouri.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete this Informed Consent Link and reply with a confirmation email.

Attached is a copy of the interview questions that will help me seek your lived experiences as a Missouri public-school superintendent.

Please feel free to contact me directly with any questions or concerns regarding my study and your participation. I can be reached at 417-359-6324 or [tillergage@gmail.com](mailto:tillergage@gmail.com). Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Gage Tiller  
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

Shared electronically via Google Form

The advisor for this dissertation project is Dr. Kevin Patterson, Professor of Education and Education Department Chair at Southwest Baptist University. This study has been approved by the Research Review Board of Southwest Baptist University.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Missouri public-school superintendents as they attempt to lead their school districts authentically in the age of the social media. Social media brings out numerous opportunities for communication and collaboration but also presents a number of challenges leaders. This research sought to understand how superintendents practiced self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internal moral perspective while leading their district.

#### Informed Consent

Participation in this interview is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research. However, you may request to end the interview at any time. By completing this Google Form, you are consenting to participation in this research effort.

All personal information such as participant name and district name will be kept confidential. I will be recording and transcribing the interview for research purposes. You will be provided a copy of both for your review. All files containing personal identifiers will be kept locked away by the researchers for seven years; at that point all information will be destroyed.

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and recorded. Upon completion, interviews will be transcribed electronically. You will be provided a copy of both the recording and transcription.

If you have any questions feel free to contact me or my advisor. I can be reached at tillergage@gmail.com or 417-359-6324. Dr. Kevin Patterson can be reached at kpatterson@sbuniv.edu. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be directed the Southwest Baptist University Research Review Board.

By checking the box below and typing your name, you are electronically consenting to participate in this research effort.

Sincerely,

Gage Tiller  
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol

#### Introductory

*I would like to thank you for being willing to participate in the interview process on your experiences leading authentically as a public-school superintendent in the age of social media. Our interview today will last approximately 45 minutes, during which I will be asking you a variety of questions in hopes to gain additional insight.*

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Missouri public-school superintendents as they attempt to lead their school districts authentically in the age of the social media. Social media brings out numerous opportunities for communication and collaboration but also presents a number of challenges to leaders. This research sought to understand how superintendents practiced self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internal moral perspective.

I would like your permission to record this interview. Please note, no names or titles will be used in our report and all individuals will be referred to as participants. Do I have your permission to record this interview? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

*If yes: Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.*

*If no: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes during our conversation.*

*Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions] Feel free to ask questions at any time, I would be more than happy to answer anything that comes up during the interview.*

#### Interview Questions –

1. Tell me about yourself:
  - a. Overall years in public education
  - b. Years of experience as a public-school administrator
  - c. Years of experience as a superintendent
  - d. Years in current position
2. What are your personal viewpoints of social media?
3. Describe your personal social media usage. What platforms do you utilize?
4. Describe your district's social media usage. What platforms do you utilize?
5. What does authentic leadership mean to you?
  - a. How did you develop your identity as a leader, your sense of self?

- b. Describe your leadership style as it pertains to authentic leadership.
6. As a superintendent, how important is it to be seen as an authentic leader?
    - a. What opportunities does social media present?
    - b. What barriers?
  7. Describe the connection between past experiences and your decision-making process.
  8. Share a time when being authentic to yourself as a superintendent created a professional setback. How did you overcome that setback?
  9. Describe your experiences as an authentic leader and managing the COVID-19 pandemic as the leader of your district. What role did social media have in this experience?
  10. Describe how you as a superintendent maintain self-awareness and self-efficacy in your daily practice.
    - a. What challenges are presented by social media?
    - b. What opportunities?
  11. Describe how you as a superintendent gain an awareness of viewpoints when making a decision.
    - a. What challenges are presented by social media?
    - b. What opportunities?
  12. Describe how you as a superintendent establish and maintain open and honest relationships.
    - a. What challenges are presented by social media?
    - b. What opportunities?
  13. Describe how you as a superintendent rely upon your morals in your decision making and daily routines.
    - a. What challenges are presented by social media?
    - b. What opportunities?
  14. Share a time that social media created turbulence in your district. How did you overcome it?
  15. Share a time that you leveraged social media for change in your district.
  16. Share a time when social media has been a vital tool to you as a superintendent.

17. What is your district's policy on responding to social media comments and feedback?

**Appendix D**  
**RRB Approval**



COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS  
1600 University Avenue  
Bolivar, Missouri 65613  
(417) 328-2099

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April 24, 2022

Re: Leading authentically: The school ~~superintendency~~ in the age of social media

Dear Gage Tiller,

On April 24, 2022, a review of your application and supporting documents for the above named research proposal was completed. The Research Review Board (RRB) for Southwest Baptist University has determined that the proposed research project meets the criteria for Exempt status as per policy 1.15.3 (A.1) in the faculty guidelines. As per the above policy "If the project is certified exempt, the principle investigator need not resubmit the project for continuing RRB review as long as there are no modifications in the exempted procedures". The study has now been approved, therefore, work on the project may begin. If any modifications to the exempted procedures are made, the RRB will need to complete a new review of the changes to determine if the project remains Exempt or if further review is necessary.

Congratulations on the approval of your project, we wish you well during its completion.

Sincerely,

Joseph Sartorius, Ph.D.  
Chair, Research Review Board  
Professor of Graduate Studies

