

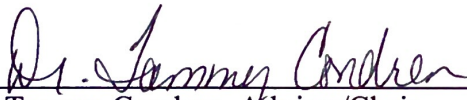
PATHWAY TO SUPERINTENDENCY DESCRIBED BY MISSOURI
SUPERINTENDENTS

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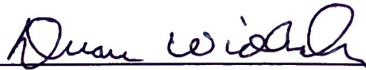
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PATHWAY TO SUPERINTENDENCY DESCRIBED BY MISSOURI
SUPERINTENDENTS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Southwest Baptist University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

In

Educational Leadership

By

Cheryl Knox, Ed. S.

Dr. Tammy Condren, Dissertation Advisor

November 2022

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I had such a hard time writing this section, first, because it is hard to believe I have actually finished this journey. It has been long, frustrating, time consuming, and challenging all around. But it has also been rewarding, educational, inspiring, and uplifting. I am so thankful I took on this task.

Second, it is hard writing because I cannot think of all of the people to whom I am grateful without getting emotional. To my husband, Chuck, with all 30,000 words I wrote in this paper, I cannot seem to find the right one that fully expresses how much I love you. The way you care for me, encourage me, and love me unconditionally is the greatest blessing God has given me. To my children Josh, Katie, Sarah, Cody and Abbie, thank you all for believing in me. You tell me how strong I am and believe I can do anything. That belief gives me energy even when I am tired and want to give up. To my mom, dad, sisters, and brothers, you are the greatest support circle a girl could ask for. Not only do you show belief in me as I take on professional challenges, you have always had my back through everything I have endured. I hope you know how much I love and appreciate you all.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore through personal interviews the pathways to superintendency of Missouri district leaders with varying teaching and leadership experiences. The central questions guiding this research were the following: (a) How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their pathway to superintendency?; (b) How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their priorities of responsibilities as outlined by the AASA standards? The framework for this study was led by Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model. This study sought to explore the gap in research regarding differences in prior educational experience of superintendents and their leadership priorities. Ninety-nine Missouri superintendents participated by answering a survey in which they ranked the importance of the AASA standards, while 10 of those superintendents also participated in semi-structured follow-up interviews. The findings of this study included four themes: (a) desire to make a greater impact, (b) the importance of being visible and involved, (c) decisions are made with a student first mentality, and (d) knowledge of fiscal management is a priority. Local boards of education, as well as current and future superintendents, can benefit from information in this study as they look to fill district administrator positions.

INTRODUCTION

Of the educators in the United States public school systems, about half teach at the elementary level while the other half are secondary educators (Taie & Goldring, 2020). However, when one starts looking at building-level leadership, nationwide there are twice as many elementary principals as secondary principals (Taie & Goldring, 2020). One might think that this percentage carries over into the central office, however, *The Study of the American School Superintendency* (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) reported that of the nation's 2262 superintendents who responded, less than a third had teaching or leadership experience at the elementary level (Glass et al., 2000). Missouri is hardly any different. In 2021 the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reported that only 33% of the state's public school superintendents had elementary certification.

Similarly, The American school superintendency study prompted researchers to look at the demographics of the superintendency and found that males outnumbered females significantly. Of the survey's respondents, only 26% were female (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). While these percentages have statistically increased over the 20-year span of the study, the question exists as to why there is a proportionate difference between the percentages of elementary educators in district leadership roles, as well as an inequity between male and female district leaders. Because female superintendents represented only a fraction of the districts, researchers began looking at the relationship between gender and the superintendency (Bernal et al., 2017; Egri-McCauley, 2019; Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018; Rodriguez, 2019); however, little research can be found on the possible connections between prior building-level experience and the

journey to the role of the superintendent. Additionally, there is a gap in research as to what superintendents describe as their priority of essential duties.

Educational leaders realize that they make numerous decisions each day that require intentional and sometimes sensitive strategies that will enable their district to achieve results (Hart, 2018; Henrikson, 2018). The role of the superintendent at the district level is demanding and requires educational leadership that will move a district toward student success. District leaders must work as a teacher-scholar, a manager, a democratic leader, an applied social scientist, and as a communicator (Bjork, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2018). They must know how to build relationships, manage staff, engage with school board members, and consider equity and inclusion for students and staff, all while leading the district's finances and academics (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Public school superintendents host a multitude of responsibilities (Hart, 2018). In larger districts the superintendent may delegate some of the duties such as public relations or curriculum and instruction to other district leaders and central office staff (Klocko et al., 2022; Kowalski, 2006). In smaller and intermediate size districts the superintendent may be responsible for a longer list of duties due to the lack of other administrators. Day-to-day duties in a smaller district could include attending civic meetings to building community relations, looking at fiscal records and building the district budget, gathering and analyzing data from state assessments, evaluating staff performance, communicating with local media, and much more (Kowalski, 2006). To accomplish these tasks the public school superintendent must find a balance but must also gain the trust and cooperation of teachers, principals, school board members, community officials, and ultimately, the students (Engel, 2020; Hill & Jochim, 2018).

Data from the DESE show that there are 518 Missouri public school districts supporting Missouri students. School districts are led by 511 superintendents (DESE, 2021). The challenge for district administrators is to decide what practices and responsibilities should be prioritized for the district to be successful. DESE provides guidelines through a Superintendent's Job Description that outlines a model for which the superintendent should conduct day-to-day operations of a district. The model consists of essential duties and responsibilities of: (a) Student Performance, (b) Highly Qualified Staff, (c) Facilities, Support and Instructional Resources, (d) Parent and Community Involvement, (e) Governance, and (f) Supervisory Duties (DESE, 2013). These responsibilities align with the Professional Standards for the Superintendency (Hoyle, 1993) developed by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). This study focused on the AASA standards. The standards include the following:

1. Leadership and District Culture
2. Policy and Governance
3. Communications and Community Relations
4. Organizational Management
5. Curriculum Planning and Development
6. Instructional Management
7. Human Resources Management
8. Values and Ethics of Leadership

A public school superintendent should be able to demonstrate leadership and develop a positive culture within the district. This would include developing and forming a written vision for the future of the district, building positive culture among the staff by

empowering others, and respecting differences (Hoyle, 1993). The vision should also include the purpose and role of each stakeholder (Fullan, 2019; Kowalski, 2006; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). The vision and culture for the future of the district should consider the values and beliefs of the community and should embrace them (Fullan, 2019; Kowalski, 2006; Norton et al., 1996; Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

The public school superintendent also needs to be knowledgeable about the system of governance within the district and state for public school entities. District leaders must adhere to local, state, and federal regulations to avoid legal liabilities (Hoyle, 1993). Effective superintendents understand their role within the governing body of the district and must work closely with the school board to develop policies that support the district strategic plan (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). It is vital that superintendents work closely with school boards. District leaders ranked school board relationships as the fourth most time-consuming issue that consumed their time (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). The superintendent must be skilled in leadership and communication when educating the board on governance and policy (Norton et al., 1996).

Building positive community relations and communicating to all stakeholders is another responsibility of the public school superintendent (Hoyle, 1993; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Norton et al., 1996). Building strong relationships requires the ability to demonstrate formal and informal listening skills. The public school superintendent must understand the current context of the community, build partnerships with local organizations and businesses, communicate with all cultural

groups, and keep the welfare of students at the forefront of decision making (Hoyle, 1993; Kowalski, 2006). Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported that school-community relations consume about 30% of public school superintendents' time, emphasizing the importance of this responsibility.

The public school superintendent also needs to be strong in organizational management (Hoyle, 1993). Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported fiscal stewardship and personnel management as two areas that consume the most time. Public school superintendents are expected to be efficient and responsible managers of local, state, and federal tax dollars (Kowalski, 2006; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). As districts struggle with adequate funding the superintendent must find a balance between educational needs versus wants (Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

The public school superintendent must be knowledgeable about curriculum planning and development and should be an instructional leader (Hoyle, 1993; Norton et al., 1996). Whether the superintendent takes a direct part in the planning of curriculum or delegates this responsibility, it is the duty of the superintendent to ensure the curriculum is aligned to federal, state, and local requirements (Norton et al., 1996). The superintendent should keep in mind that when decisions about curriculum are decentralized and stakeholders at the building-level have a voice, the potential for improvement is likely to be realized (Norton et al., 1996).

An expectation for public school superintendents is to be an instructional leader that guides teachers to maximize student achievement (Hoyle, 1993). Effective district leaders continually work with their staff to examine goals and instructional practices (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018). Findings by Carbaugh and Marzano (2018) suggested that

effective superintendents continually monitor student achievement and instructional goals. District leaders should prioritize consistency in instruction, define what good teaching really means, and emphasize the need to differentiate to meet student needs (Reeves, 2009). Additionally, effective superintendents allocate resources to support student achievement (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018).

The public school superintendent needs to demonstrate the ability to manage personnel (Hoyle, 1993). Salary and benefits make up about 80% of a district's budget (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Responses from the decennial study of the American superintendent showed that district leaders report spending a large percent of their time on personnel management, however the bulk of that time is spent addressing personnel issues instead of recruiting, hiring, developing, and growing professional skills of educators (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Public school superintendents must work closely with building leaders and the human resource department to manage quality educators.

The public school superintendent should work to develop a system to improve the performance of all staff members (Hoyle, 1993). Bollinger (2019) found that superintendents considered developing personal leadership capacity as a prime concern prior to becoming a superintendent, but once in the district role, priorities shifted to developing the leadership capacity of staff, specifically building principals and teachers (Bollinger, 2019). Effective leaders realize the importance of personnel selection, development, and retention; in doing so appropriate models for professional growth for their educators are selected (Burmeister, 2018; Hoyle, 1993; Reeves, 2009).

The public school superintendent should demonstrate moral and ethical leadership (Hoyle, 1993). An effective leader will behave in an ethical manner both personally and professionally. District leader actions should promote integrity, fairness, and trust (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Educational leaders face moral and ethical dilemmas regarding students, personnel, and the educational institution as a whole. Stakeholders look to the superintendent to make ethical decisions. Public school superintendents should develop a process to consider the complexity of the situation and analyze how it may impact the district and community (Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Leadership has been the focus of many studies and continues to propel current literature (Bjork et al., 2018; Northouse, 2021). The theoretical framework for this study was centered on situational leadership. The idea of situational leadership was born from the model suggested by Hersey and Blanchard (1996) in the late '60s. The life cycle theory explored task behavior and relationship behavior of managers. Situational leadership suggests there is not a single best leadership style, however effective leaders should utilize different styles depending on the situation and the people being led (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). Situational leadership puts emphasis on a manager to determine if high task/low relationship behavior or low task/high relationship behavior will be most effective in each situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996).

In addition to the life cycle theory other models lend themselves to situational leadership theory. Fiedler's (1974) contingency model of leadership aligned with situational leadership by stating that there is no one best leadership style and that

effective leaders will respond according to the situation and their own experiences. House's (1971) path-goal theory argued that leaders need to be flexible and respond according to the demands of the situation. change for different circumstances and situations (Olowoselu, Mohamad, & Aboudahr, 2019). Depending on the circumstance, the leader should choose to approach the situation by achievement orientated, directive, participative, or supportive behaviors (House, 1971).

Comprehensive studies add to the body of literature describing numerous types of leadership that consider tasks, relationships, and situations (Dinibutun, 2020). Leaders should realize the importance of understanding different leadership models and consider the organizational environment when approaching situations (Dinibutun, 2020). Further literature suggests the need for there to be an equal balance in management training and leadership preparation for superintendents and other leaders (Farmer, 2007; Henkel, Marion, & Bourdeau, 2019). The researcher for this study sought to review relevant literature and determine how Missouri superintendents might have demonstrated situational leadership behaviors along their journey to their current position by viewing situations through multiple lenses when making decisions based on their previous experiences.

Problem Statement

There are 13,598 public school districts in the United States (Taie & Goldring, 2020). The responsibilities of public school superintendents have become complex and demanding. The position requires a balance between management, guidance, and governance (Bjork et al., 2018). Superintendents reported in a national study (Finnan et al., 2015) that 65.4% started their careers at the middle school or high school

level. Statistics support that the high school principal position is the number one path from which superintendents arrive (Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Farmer, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Sperandio, 2015). There are multiple studies on the path to superintendency (Dias, 2019; Egri-McCauley, 2019; Farmer, 2007; Jarrett, Tran, & Buckman, 2018) and a wealth of studies on the underrepresentation of females in the district administrative position (Bernal et al., 2017; Egri-McCauley, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018), but little data exist on differences in current Missouri public school superintendents regarding how previous building-level experience and gender influences their professional journey or how they prioritize responsibilities and duties of the position.

This study reported the stories from superintendents about the problem of inequity in building-level experiences and gender in district leadership. The superintendent must achieve a balance in how he or she provides support and leads a district (Bjork et al., 2018). Bollinger (2019) found that what superintendents expected to spend time on before they earned the position and what they actually do was significantly different. If gender and professional experiences reveal that priorities are focused more strongly in certain areas but neglected in others, it may create an imbalance and deficit areas for districts. The National Center for Educational Statistics (Taie & Goldring, 2020) reported that building-level leaders spent an average of 56.1 hours per week on school-related activities. However, when one looks at the areas in which principals spend their time, there is a noticeable difference between building-level leaders. Secondary school principals reported that they spent the greatest percentage of their time on internal administrative tasks. However, elementary principals' time was focused more heavily on curriculum and teaching-related tasks (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Elementary building

leaders also reported spending more of their time interacting with parents than secondary principals reported (Taie & Goldring, 2020).

Results of another study of elementary and secondary leaders determined that building leaders at the elementary level scored slightly higher scores on domains of distributed leadership practices of: (a) focus on learning, (b) monitoring teaching and learning, (c) building nested learning communities, and (d) maintaining safe and effective learning environments (Gedik & Bellibas, 2015). However, when looking at the domain of acquiring and allocating resources, secondary leaders scored higher (Gedik & Bellibas, 2015). This could create a problem if a district leader who came from one building-level focused too much of their time in one area at the expense of another.

This study addressed a research gap noted above by focusing on the narratives of practicing Missouri public school superintendents regarding their priorities and practices, to determine if professional experiences at the elementary and secondary levels might help shape those priorities. This study also explored if public school superintendents report whether gender influences their priorities. Specifically, this study helped identify the approach used by public school superintendents with varying backgrounds toward leading a school district. This research will contribute to the field of education by exploring the description of prioritization based on previous job experience and gender, and thus possibly assist districts' selection of future leaders to move their district forward.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the varying building-level experiences of school leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role. Participants were asked to share

how their educational experiences in leadership shaped their priorities for leading their district. AASA standards were used to outline superintendent responsibilities.

Research Questions

The researcher explored the experiences of Missouri public school superintendents regarding their professional experiences and journey to their current position. The central qualitative questions driving the research were these:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their pathway to superintendency?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their priorities of responsibilities as outlined by the AASA Standards?
 - a. What professional leadership experiences have Missouri public school superintendents had that helped them successfully perform each of these duties?
 - b. What professional leadership experiences were Missouri public school superintendents lacking that could have better prepared them to perform these duties?

Additionally, the researcher obtained demographic data regarding gender for further analysis of the research questions, as well as a survey ranking of superintendents' priorities of AASA Standards.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to add to the body of literature about the leadership experiences of public school superintendent candidates with varying types of

educational administrative experience. This study sought to discover if secondary or elementary experience or if gender tends to lead a superintendent to focus more in one area than on another. Specifically, this study helped determine if previous building-level experience shapes priorities and practices of Missouri public school superintendents. This will add to the body of literature assisting administrators and local school boards seeking candidates for leadership roles.

Previous research looked at gender equity within the central office (Bernal et al., 2017; Egri-McCauley, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018; Rodriguez, 2019), but has failed to sufficiently address the gap in building-level experience. Additional research has identified that there is an imbalance in previous building-level experiences of superintendents but has not made a connection to experience and leadership styles (Dias, 2019; Egri-McCauley, 2019; Farmer, 2007; Jarrett et al., 2018). Tallerico (2000) found that most consultants and board members value secondary experience over elementary experience. Gedik and Bellibas (2015) found that superintendents showed a difference in their focus on domains of monitoring teaching and learning, maintaining safe environments, and acquiring and allocating funds. Depending on the school board's focus for improvement, strength in one of these areas over another may influence their decision. These boards are searching for candidates who can manage district resources, as well as develop programs (Tallerico, 2000).

In addition to the valuable insight this study will provide to school boards, it can help inform the preparation of candidates who are looking to become building-level leaders. By hearing the stories of current Missouri superintendents with varying paths to leadership, upcoming administrators can make themselves aware of disparities in how

superintendents lead. This information can help them navigate through hurdles that may prevent them from securing a position in the central office.

Definition of Key Terms

This study focused on leadership experiences of Missouri public school superintendents. It is important to have a clear definition of terms to gain a true understanding of the significance of the study and its results. The following terms are used throughout this study and should be interpreted as follows:

Elementary School. Schools that contain prekindergarten up through eighth grade (Taie & Goldring, 2020). For the purpose of this study, this is a building that houses any combination of Grades K through 6.

Principal. The principal is the head or person with the most authority in a K-12 school (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021).

Secondary School. Schools containing ninth through 12th (Taie & Goldring, 2020). For the purpose of this study, this is a building that houses any grades not lower than seventh and not to exceed grade 12

Situational Leadership. Situational leadership uses existing leadership models to achieve leadership goals that are appropriate to the desired situation and achieve maximum goals. The concept focuses on adjusting the force to the reality of the actual conditions on the ground (Maisyaroh et al., 2019).

Superintendent of Schools. The official whose job is to oversee the day-to-day operation of a district in accordance with board policy (Norton et al., 1996). The superintendent provides information and recommendations to the school board and acts as a liaison between the school board and the public (Norton et al., 1996). For the

remainder of discussion in this study, the term superintendent will refer to public school superintendents.

Limitations

As with any research this study faced some weaknesses that were beyond the researcher's control. Limitations may have a negative impact on the study (Mills & Gay, 2018; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Although the researcher tried to present reliable information when forming themes, there still existed possible limitations that would affect the outcome. The limitations of this study were as follows:

1. The responses were based on a purposive sampling and may not reflect the general population of Missouri public school superintendents.
2. Participants may not have responded to the central questions truthfully or may have only shared experiences that would have contributed to themes they thought the researcher was trying to develop.
3. The size of district in which the participant had experience may have influenced the priorities of essential duties.
4. The sample size and selection may not accurately reflect general experiences of Missouri public school superintendents.
5. Responses were limited to self-reported data, which are sometimes difficult to verify.
6. Researcher bias was a limitation of this study.

Delimitations

Delimitations define the boundaries within which the researcher conducted the study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The delimitations in this study were as follows:

1. The researcher chose to look through the lens of situational leadership when developing a framework for this study.
2. Researcher bias is a factor to consider in qualitative studies.
3. Only Missouri public school superintendents with at least 3 years of district leadership experience in one or more districts were chosen.
4. The researcher chose to have equal representation from elementary and secondary experience.
5. The researcher chose to have equal representation regarding public school superintendents' gender.
6. Only one superintendent was chosen from each of the nine Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC) in Missouri, except for the largest region, in which two superintendents were interviewed.
7. The quality and quantity of interview questions were delimited by the researcher.

Assumptions

Assumptions for this study were as follows:

1. It was assumed by the researcher that participants would answer honestly and truthfully to the best of their memory regarding experiences and which duties they prioritized.
2. Generalizability of this study regarding the reliability to apply findings to all Missouri districts.

Design Controls

This researcher chose to select a qualitative narrative study that sought to explore how Missouri public school superintendents described their professional experiences and

considerations when making decisions for the district. By choosing a narrative study the researcher was able to discover perspectives and lived experiences of Missouri superintendents. The design controls were developed to ensure that the study was valid.

Due to a gap in research, central questions were developed to learn more about the career pathways experienced by public school superintendents, and the experiences that led them to district leadership. The researcher first obtained data from DESE to review and analyze certifications of current Missouri public school superintendents. The researcher sent email surveys to 511 superintendents representing the 518 public school districts in the state. Since the return response of surveys can be problematic, the research utilized electronic surveys to control this potential problem. The survey consisted of demographic questions regarding gender, district size, tenure as a superintendent, and building-level career path to the superintendency. Also included in the survey were self-reported prioritization of professional responsibilities according to the AASA superintendent standards.

Purposive sampling was used to identify 10 of the superintendents who responded to the survey questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested using one or two individuals when interviewing for a narrative study and to provide a larger sample if the researcher is trying to develop a collective story. The DESE established nine RPDCs in the state. The researcher chose to interview one public school superintendent from each of the eight RPDCs and two superintendents from the Southwest Region, known as the Agency for Teaching Leading and Learning (ATLL), which included substantially more districts than the other eight regions (DESE, 2021). The selection of 10 participants allowed a collective story to develop

To address some of the delimitations, rural, urban, and suburban districts were all represented within the 10 invitations. Using information from DESE and the survey responses, the participants were divided into two groups: superintendents that had largely elementary teaching and leadership experience, and public school superintendents that had mostly secondary teaching and leadership experience. Additionally, an equal number of male and female participants were invited to represent both the elementary and secondary levels. Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA, 2011) considers superintendents with under 3 years' experience to be emerging leaders, and those with 4 or more to be veteran leaders. Therefore, the researcher chose to only invite Missouri public school superintendents with at least 3 years of experience at one or more districts in the sampling size. The researcher assumed all participants who accepted the invitation did so voluntarily and were honest when providing their answers.

Another control was to assure each of the participants that their responses would remain confidential. A letter was included in the survey explaining the purpose of the study and inviting participants to take part in the interview process. The letter included a promise to keep responses confidential and anonymous.

The researcher assumed the participants were being honest and truthful with their answers to the best of their memory. Participants understood that their contribution was on a volunteer basis and could withdraw at any time. The researcher interviewed participants regarding their experiences on their pathway to the superintendency. The interviews were conducted and recorded through Google Meet or Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai software. Responses were coded to identify and analyze themes. Interviews were coded thematically for comparison to themes found between the participants.

Creswell and Poth (2018) offered alternate procedures for establishing validation in qualitative research. Instead of establishing reliability in qualitative studies one must seek to establish dependability by triangulated data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used information reported from the email surveys, and information obtained through the interviews, as well as archival data from each district such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent messages to triangulate data. If someone were to reproduce this study, results may vary as each district leader enters the position with different life experiences.

Summary

There remains an inequity in building-level experiences as well as gender in district leadership nationwide (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Of the nation's 2,262 superintendents who responded to a survey conducted by AASA, less than a third had teaching or leadership experience at the elementary level (Glass et al., 2000). Additionally, there continues to be a significant inequity in the ratio of female-to-male superintendents (Finnan et al., 2015; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). This imbalance in building-level experience and gender equality poses a problem for school districts if the inequity creates an uneven focus on district responsibilities. Missouri public school superintendents who are focused more strongly in certain areas and tend to neglect other tasks may create a deficit within the district. The theoretical framework used in this study focused on situational leadership. Situational leadership puts emphasis on a manager to determine if high task/low relationship behavior or low task/high relationship behavior will be most effective in each situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the lived experiences and journeys to the

superintendency for Missouri public school superintendents. School district leaders with varying building-level experiences were asked to describe their pathway and how their educational experiences shaped their priorities of how they lead their district. This study documented stories from 10 Missouri public school superintendents.

In Chapter Two the researcher will provide a review of related literature supporting the theory of situational leadership and leadership behaviors. The literature presented will explore how leaders should consider the situation and relationship of subordinates to determine how to lead in a given situation. Expectations for public school superintendents and school leaders will be established. The responsibilities will be outlined and described for district-level leadership, as well as what building-level examples might resemble. The methodology of this study will be presented in Chapter Three along with a description of the participants. Findings of the study as well as themes that emerged from interviews will be presented in Chapter Four. In the fifth and concluding chapter the researcher will summarize the findings and conclusions derived from the study along with implications for education and recommendations for future research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

School districts across the United States have a responsibility to meet the needs of the whole student. District superintendents have changed the way they handle day-to-day responsibilities to meet public expectations (Bjork et al., 2018; Kowalski, 2006; Tienken & Domenech, 2021; Wright & Papa, 2020). District leaders must be skilled in responding to policy and governance, curriculum and development, and communications and community relations, all while being the expert on managing personnel and managing district finances (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). With such a wide range of responsibilities it would seem that the demographic characteristics of school superintendents would be just as broad. Yet a survey (Tienken & Domenech, 2021) of American superintendents showed the portrait of a district leader is still a White, married male with principal experience. Moreover, building-level experience tends to be from the secondary level for most superintendents (Glass et al., 2000).

While raw data are easily obtained about numbers and percentages, it is difficult to find research on the possible connections between prior building-level experience and the journey to the role of the superintendent and how the superintendents might prioritize duties. Hart (2018) examined factors that might influence superintendents' overall decision making. The study revealed that superintendents tend to make decisions based off what they feel is best for students, followed by what they perceive will be the public's opinion, and finally, advice from peers influenced their decisions (Hart, 2018). However, there is a gap in research as to what superintendents describe as their priority of essential duties. This chapter includes a review of relevant literature regarding situational

leadership, gender disparities within the superintendency, public school building-level responsibilities, and superintendent standards.

Situational Leadership Theory

Situational leadership suggests there is not a single best leadership style, however effective leaders should utilize different styles depending on the situation and the people being led (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). The life cycle theory explored task behavior and relationship behavior of managers. Situational leadership puts emphasis on a manager to determine if high task/low relationship behavior or low task/high relationship behavior will be most effective in a given situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). Fiedler (1974) added to this research by describing the connection of task behavior and relationship behavior in his contingency theory. The contingency theory stated the task at hand and the relationship between the leader and members will influence the outcome (Fiedler, 1974). Similarly, the path-goal theory stated the importance of leaders to adjust their leadership behaviors based on team members' abilities and motivation, as well as the difficulty of the job (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; House, 1971; Olowoselu et al., 2019). Situational leadership uses existing leadership models to achieve leadership goals appropriate to the desired situation and reach maximum levels. The concept focuses on adjusting the force to the reality of the actual conditions on the ground (Maisyaroh et al., 2019). An effective leader uses a mix of different leadership traits to adapt to the needs of the organization, the preparedness of the employees, and the intensity of the crisis (Dinibutun, 2020; Henkel et al., 2019; Islam, Juraybi, & Alraythi, 2021).

The life cycle model of situational leadership describes four styles of leader behavior in decision making: telling or directing, selling or coaching, participating or

supporting, and delegating (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019). These styles follow the continuum of boss-centered decision making where there is an increased use of authority by the boss, and subordinate-centered decision making where there is increased freedom or autonomy for the subordinates (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018). The telling or directing style in the situational leadership model involves a leader's tendency to be decisive, directing, determined, forceful, and structured. The selling or coaching style describes a leader who is adaptive, coaching, energetic, interactive, involving, and resourceful. The participating or supporting style leader is appreciative, considerate, encouraging, patient, supportive, and understanding. Finally, the delegating style leader is analytical, deliberate, methodical, organized, and reflective (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019; Walls, 2019).

In situational leadership it is important for the leader to consider the readiness or maturity of his or her team before employing one of the styles of telling, selling, participating, or delegating. Considering whether the team is knowledgeable, confident, willing, or eager to complete the project is part of identifying the subordinates' readiness level (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019; Walls, 2019). Hersey and Blanchard described the readiness of subordinates with four levels of maturity, M1 – M4: M1 group members lack the knowledge skills and willingness to complete the task, M2 group members are enthusiastic but lack the ability to complete the task, M3 group members have the skills and capacity to complete the task but are unwilling to take the

responsibility, and M4 (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019).

Hersey and Blanchard's theory noted that different leadership styles are most appropriate depending on the given situation and the subordinates' maturity level or readiness level (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019). Hersey and Blanchard's life cycle model of situational leadership reaches outside the relationship and personality characteristics between the leader and member, and instead points to the readiness of the employee (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019). A study (Reed, 2021) showed a leader's ability to adapt based on employee needs was more important than a specific leadership style. Because situational leadership styles vary depending on specific conditions and relationships, it is important to look at how gender may affect the leader's or leaders' response.

Gender and Leadership

The most recent data reported by the American superintendent study showed there are more men in the role of public school superintendent than women. The study revealed that 74% of public school superintendents in the United States were male while 26% were female (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Similar percentages are evident in individual states. A study of Texas superintendents (Rodriguez, 2019) disclosed 80% of districts had a male leader with the other 20% being female. In Pennsylvania, the gap was more significant with females representing 6% of the public school superintendent positions, while males held the other 94% (Egri-McCauley, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). The number of female superintendents is disproportionate to the number of female educators

and leaders who are qualified for the role (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Martinez, Molina-Lopez, & Mateos de Cabo, 2021; Rodriguez, 2019). Taie and Goldring (2020) found women held under half of public school principal positions. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education reported 76% of educators nationwide are female (Taie & Goldring, 2020).

While data continue to highlight fewer women in the public school superintendent position, a definitive reason for the imbalance has not been conclusive (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). One likely reason for the disparity could be the career pathway chosen by women tends to exclude them for consideration for the job. Women tend to make up 76% of all public school teachers, but only 40% of secondary teachers (Taie & Goldring, 2020). The same trend is evident in principal positions as well. Females held 67% of elementary principal jobs as opposed to 33% of secondary principal jobs (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Since 63% of superintendents come from secondary leadership positions or a position that did not include elementary experience, it would follow that there are more males contending for superintendent positions than females (Farmer, 2007; Sperandio, 2015). Research has shown that secondary school leaders have more opportunities to demonstrate leadership abilities than do elementary leaders (Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Xie & Shen, 2013). Because of this disparity, women tend to seek alternative routes to district leadership (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020).

Most superintendents follow a career path that includes experience as a secondary teacher, secondary assistant principal, or secondary principal before moving to a position as superintendent (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Glenn & Hickey, 2009; Sperandio, 2015; Tallericco, 2000). Research (Bailes & Guthery, 2020) found that even when a traditional

path is chosen, women have over one year more experience than men before gaining an assistant principal position. Once in the assistant role, there was no significant difference in rate of promotion to a principal role when looking at gender, however the promotions tend to lean toward women into elementary principal positions and men into secondary principal positions (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

Consequently, women are finding there is an alternate path through the central office by way of coordinator, director, or assistant superintendent through which women are choosing to get to a superintendent position (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Dias, 2019; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Women tend to come from an alternative route compared to their male counterparts. Davis and Bowers (2019) reported of the over 800 respondents to their survey most of the women who obtained superintendency positions came directly from an assistant superintendent role, while men reported that they were hired from a principal role.

Regardless of the chosen path to district leadership some researchers suggest that women are reluctant to apply for the top job even if they are qualified. A study on gender and career paths (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020) found that of current assistant superintendents, men were 1.3 times more likely to aspire to superintendency than females who were in the same role. Numerous factors may contribute to the hesitancy for women to apply for the superintendent position, such as families to a new district, balancing work and family, a desire to remain in a position that interacts regularly with students, and a lack of self-efficacy (Dias, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Jarrett et al., 2018). Additionally, women realize they are competing for few spots that are available and acknowledge this can create an unhealthy environment between peers (Steeber,

2019), which may contribute to the hesitancy as well. Higgenbottom and Robinson (2019) found that women superintendents reported how lonely the position is and how strong support systems need to be in place due to the demand and stress of the job.

Finally, a perceived barrier for females moving to the superintendency is the possibility of the hiring committee's attitude about women in leadership roles (Dias, 2019). Women who participated in a study in Arizona reported they experienced gender bias and had to prove themselves competent whereas their male counterparts did not (Dias, 2019). Other studies found though females have made greater strides in leadership in education compared to other fields, women report they are still discriminated against by gender norms (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018). However, although statistically insignificant, one study revealed gender did not influence a hiring committee to offer an interview to a superintendent candidate (Jarrett et al., 2018).

Data indicated the gap in gender equity of superintendents is narrowing. The percentage of women in district leadership roles rose from 13% in 2000 to nearly 27% in 2020 (Glass et al., 2000; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). However, the most prevalent position included in career pathways to superintendency is the high school principal position and fewer women hold this position than men (Sampson & Ridyolph, 2021). Until there is a balance of district leadership between genders, it is important to look at research and identify the reasons for this inequity (Sampson & Ridyolph, 2021).

Since situational leadership styles vary depending on specific conditions and relationships, it is important to look at whether gender and previous experience may affect the leaders' response. Results from a study (Zbihlejova, Frankovsky, & Birknerova, 2018) indicated male leaders tend to exhibit more authoritarian leadership

behaviors than women, who look at both the work and well-being of the subordinates holistically. The study also found that females prefer to lead by sharing power and information (Zbihlejova et al., 2018). This study sought to add to the knowledge base of whether gender plays a role in the path to superintendency and leadership behaviors. In addition to gender differences, this study sought to investigate how leaders prioritize district-level responsibilities.

Building-Level Leadership Opportunities

Approximately two thirds of current superintendents do not have elementary experience (Farmer, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Sperandio, 2015). Additionally, research notes the most common path to superintendency includes secondary leadership experience, whether as a principal, assistant principal, or teacher (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Farmer, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Sperandio, 2015). It is important then to note the differences in building-level routines, responsibilities, and overall dynamics. Xie and Shen (2013) reported secondary teachers perceived they had a greater chance for leadership opportunities than their elementary counterparts. Secondary educators believed they had more opportunities in curriculum and instructional areas, whereas elementary educators believed they had more opportunities in setting discipline policies (Xie & Shen, 2013). Hiring committees and school board members view high school principalship as more complex and characterized by more visible pressures and difficult problems than elementary or middle school (Tallerico, 2000). As a result, work experience at a high school level is looked upon more favorably (Farmer, 2007; Glenn & Hickey, 2009; Kim & Brunner, 2009).

Secondary schools tend to have more opportunities for individuals to demonstrate leadership abilities due to high-profile, high-visibility positions such as department chair or coaching, which are more numerous than at the elementary level (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Superintendent search consultants who participated in a study (Glenn & Hickey, 2009) agreed that high school principalship was the most beneficial preparatory position for superintendents based on its complex nature and interacting with a variety of district stakeholders daily. Conversely, fewer opportunities exist at the elementary level for demonstrating leadership abilities (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

Overall responsibilities for building leadership tend to be similar at all levels. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, PSEL, are the leadership standards for building leaders that have been adopted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary Principals (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). They include but are not limited to: (a) Mission and Vision, (b) Ethics and Professional Norms, (c) Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, (d) Curriculum Instruction and Assessments, (e) Community of Care and Support for Students, (f) Professional Capacity for School Personnel, (g) Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, (h) Operations and management, and (i) School improvement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). However, even though professional standards are the same at the elementary level and secondary level, day-to-day operations of each level are different.

Situational leadership describes four styles of leader behavior in decision making: telling or directing, selling, participating or supporting, and delegating (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Walls, 2019).

Superintendents need to look at the specific responsibility they have and decide which style they will use to lead that situation. Regardless of whether their background was at the elementary or secondary level previously, all public school superintendents have the same standards and responsibilities that need to be met.

Superintendent Standards and Responsibilities

In many occupations there is an expectation to meet certain standards and to exercise specific responsibilities. By using the situational leadership style, a leader can cover the many responsibilities with flexibility depending on the given circumstances (Islam et al., 2021). Standards for superintendents were developed in 1993 by the AASA (Hoyle, 1993). The standards include the following:

1. Leadership and District Culture
2. Policy and Governance
3. Communications and Community Relations
4. Organizational Management
5. Curriculum Planning and Development
6. Instructional Management
7. Human Resources Management
8. Values and Ethics of Leadership

In 1996, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) created a set of standards for school leaders (Smylie & Murphy, 2018). Those standards were then followed by the PSEL (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). While beneficial for all school leaders, the ISLLC and PSEL standards focus more on building-level leadership and are not specific to a superintendent's role (National Policy

Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Since there has not been a new set of standards that is exclusive to public school superintendents, this study focused on the eight AASA standards.

Leadership and District Culture. The first of the AASA standards involves leadership and district culture. According to Hersey and Blanchard's (1996) situational leadership theory, the leader must first determine the level of maturity and readiness of an organization and its team. It is important for a leader to look at district culture and determine the current context of the organization (Schein, 2017). School culture has been defined as shared values and beliefs that are evident in the way the school operates (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). Schein (2017) described culture as dynamic and changing and includes everything a community has learned as it evolved. Bolman and Deal (2021) stated that "culture forms the superglue that bonds an organization, unites people and helps an enterprise accomplish desired ends" (p. 253). Culture is a process as well as a product that is shaped over time and develops distinctive beliefs, values, and customs (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Schein, 2017). Culture is visible to those within the group as well as outside observers through symbols and artifacts (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Schein, 2017). Artifacts and symbols can include those that are tangible, and some that are not such as goals, values, and assumptions (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Schein, 2017).

A public school superintendent should be able to demonstrate leadership and develop positive culture within the district. This would include developing and forming a written vision for the future of the district, building positive culture among the staff by empowering others, and respecting differences (Hoyle, 1993). The vision should also include the purpose and role of each stakeholder (Fullan, 2019; Kowalski, 2006; Norton

et al., 1996; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). The vision and culture for the future of the district should consider the values and beliefs of the community and should embrace them (Fullan, 2019; Kowalski, 2006; Norton et al., 1996; Tienken & Domenech, 2021; Wright & Papa, 2020). The vision should be clear and should reflect the meaning of the work (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Over time, the culture will become routine and seen as how things are done in this district (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

Kotter, Akhtar, and Gupta (2021) describe building a guiding coalition, a group that will cultivate the direction and vision of the organization, then relay progress to its stakeholders. It is the responsibility of the organizational leader to build this guiding coalition (Kotter et al., 2021). With the help of the school board and administration, the superintendent can set a collaborative culture by establishing the direction and climate for the district (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). In working with stakeholders, collaboration should be deliberate and strive to provide shared learning, moral support, and a culture of trust (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). District-level leadership should show commitment to continuous improvement by being willing to change current practices, listening to team members about change practices, and modeling reflective practices (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). By first building a coalition, the superintendent can then work with stakeholders to develop policy and govern the district toward the common goal.

Policy and Governance. When approaching an organization by using a situational leadership style, the leader must decide whether to use a telling or directing, selling or coaching, participating or supporting, or delegating approach (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). In addressing the who, what, when, and how of the organization, Henkel and Bourdeau (2018) suggested it may be best to use the telling leadership style if

the members are not yet ready to participate in decision making. However, in developing policy and governance the superintendent should first develop a unity of purpose with the school board (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Henrikson, 2018). This shared understanding of purpose can help lead the board to being active participants in decision making (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Henrikson, 2018).

Kowalski (2006) outlined policy and governance to include the following: defining mutual expectations for superintendent and school board working procedures; formulating district policies for programs; strategies for adhering to local, state, and federal requirements; and recognizing actions that may involve civil or criminal liability. The public school superintendent needs to be knowledgeable about the system of governance for public school entities within the district and state. District leaders must adhere to local, state, and federal regulations to avoid legal liabilities (Hoyle, 1993). Effective superintendents understand their role within the governing body of the district and must work closely with the school board to develop policies that support the district strategic plan (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Norton et al., 1996; Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Local school boards of education were originally established to provide effective governance for the district (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Though many aspects of education have changed, this responsibility has remained constant, emphasizing the importance of a successful system of governance and effective superintendent and school board relationships to provide quality education for students (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Engel, 2020; Henrikson, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2018). The responsibility to determine policy and regulation for school districts is delegated by state legislature to local school boards who adopt the governing policies. Norton et al. (1996) stated that policies should

be concerned with goals rather than procedure, be general enough to allow for discretion by school personnel, and be sustainable and relevant over extended periods of time.

Policies should reflect the direction of the district (Norton et al., 1996).

Governance and politics work together but are two separate ideas. Campbell and Fullan (2019) described politics as holding and using power, and governance as exercising authority on a day-to-day basis. Ideally a superintendent wants to work toward having the two elements work in a positive direction. When a district has politics with good governance, one can see capacity building that works toward a core agenda, long and short-term goals, and a governing board that works for all the stakeholders (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). This can only come to fruition if the superintendent and school board are working cohesively.

In the most recent American superintendent study, district leaders ranked school board relationships as the fourth most time-consuming issue (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). It is vital that superintendents work closely with school boards (Henrikson, 2018; Higgenbottom & Robinson, 2019). In other studies, superintendents reported their relationship with the school board is one of the most influential aspects of whether they choose to stay in a district or to move on (Davidson, Schwanenberger, & Wiggall, 2019; Higgenbottom & Robinson, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). With each election the representation of the school board can change, thus potentially changing the interests and priorities of the school board. The change can be an opportunity, challenge, or even a barrier for the superintendent, emphasizing the need to have a strong positive and clearly defined relationship with the board (Davidson et al., 2019; Henrikson, 2018; Williams et al., 2019). The superintendent needs to communicate that the role of the board is to

develop policy and the role of the superintendent is to provide district leadership in carrying out policy (Norton et al., 1996). Campbell and Fullan (2019) referred to a governance mindset as the “shared attitudes and beliefs that school boards and superintendents must develop and possess related to the action and manner of governing” (p. 9). The relationship must be intentional and not left to chance. It is important for the superintendent to not only build this relationship with the school board, but to also communicate and build relationships with the community.

Communications and Community Relations. When using a situational style of leading the leader must take time to get to know stakeholders to determine the readiness level and conditions of the organization (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Maisyaroh et al., 2019). This should take place by getting to know the community and building relationships. Building positive community relations and communicating to all stakeholders is another standard and responsibility of the public school superintendent (Hoyle, 1993; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Wright & Papa, 2020). Norton et al. (1996) described communication in two parts, internal and external. Internal communication exists to inform administrators, teachers, staff, and students; external communication is targeted at parents, businesses, civic and community organizations, special interest groups, and alumni (Norton et al., 1996). Although the superintendent carries the responsibility of getting information to the school board and the public, the implementation and delivery of communication is a shared responsibility (Norton et al., 1996).

The public school superintendent must understand the current context of the community, build partnerships with local organizations and businesses, communicate

with all cultural groups, and keep the welfare of students at the forefront of decision making (Hoyle, 1993; Kowalski, 2006). The superintendent is responsible for providing transparency to district stakeholders (Melton, Reeves, McBrayer, & Smith, 2019). Transparency starts by articulating the district's purpose and vision to the community (Hoyle, 1993; Kowalski, 2006; Melton et al., 2019). The superintendent should never assume that accurate information is being relayed to both the internal and external audience. There should be a system in place for sharing information that should include, but not be limited to advisory committees, visitations, newsletters, social media and electronic mail, and surveys and questionnaires (Norton et al., 1996). Superintendents realize the importance of using social media to communicate to the public on a regular basis (Tienken & Domenech, 2021; Wright & Papa, 2020). Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported 67% of the districts had someone who was responsible for posting and monitoring the district social media page to share information.

Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported school-community relations consume about 30% of public school superintendents' time, emphasizing the importance of this responsibility. However, in the same report, superintendents noted that although they engage regularly with the community, it does not often include meeting more than once a month for advisory purposes (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Of the planning in which community members are involved, constructing district or school vision ranked highest in participation by superintendents followed by fundraising, long-term planning, and facility planning (Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported 95% of superintendents who participated in the Decennial Study of Superintendents said they felt supported by the community and

96% reported they were actively involved in the community in which they worked. Some of the ways superintendents can get involved are by participating in community activities and service organizations, inviting the community to the school, establishing community partnerships, offering public forums, and forming community advisory committees (Kowalski, 2006; Norton et al., 1996). Regardless of the organization or the path in which communication is delivered, it is the responsibility of the superintendent to demonstrate school/community relationships and communicate the vision and happenings to all stakeholders (Hoyle, 1993). Once this relationship has been established the leader can then feel confident when managing all aspects of the district, including operations and resources, with the support of the community (Norton et al., 1996).

Organizational Management. “The school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment” (Kowalski, 2006, p. 23). The AASA standards for superintendents include Organizational Management as the fourth standard. Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported fiscal stewardship and personnel management as two areas that consume most of a district leader’s time. However, organizational management is not only limited to finances and personnel, but also includes monitoring and understanding practices in facilities management, technology, maintenance, food service, and other auxiliary programs (Hoyle, 1993; Meador, 2019). As with other aspects of the superintendency, a leader using a situational approach to leadership must first look at the current conditions of the district as well as personnel who perform operational tasks to see what approach to use for that specific situation.

As the chief financial officer of the district, public school superintendents are expected to be efficient and responsible managers of local, state, and federal tax dollars (Kowalski, 2006; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Superintendents ranked school finance as the second most important course when preparing for district leadership (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Fiscal responsibilities include, but are not limited to, prioritizing spending, distributing funds, and estimating revenue. Regardless of the size and enrollment of a district, the importance of fiscal responsibility is paramount (Kowalski, 2006). Day-to-day fiscal responsibilities will vary depending on the level of central office staff available to the superintendent (Kowalski, 2006). Larger district superintendents may appoint district personnel to handle some of the budgeting and fiscal management; however, the accountability for district finances ultimately falls back to the superintendent (Klocko et al., 2022; Kowalski, 2006).

As districts struggle with adequate funding the superintendent must find a balance between how and where to spend money (Meador, 2019; Tienken & Domenech, 2021; Wright & Papa, 2020). According to Cornman, Ampadu, Hanak, Howell, and Wheeler's 2020 report, U.S. school districts showed a range of \$6,646 to \$26,588 for per pupil expenditures with a median expenditure of \$11,722. Statistics (De Brey, Snyder, Zhang, & Dillow, 2021) showed for the 2018-2019 school year, elementary and secondary schools in the United States spent \$832 billion. Although most district budgets are reserved for personnel costs, there remains a significant amount for superintendents to appropriate and prioritize (De Brey et al., 2021; Klocko et al., 2022). Prioritization of funds changes as an administrator becomes more experienced. Klocko et al. (2022) reported that superintendents with 3 or fewer years of experience tend to worry more

about finances and short-term emergencies and long-term initiatives than did their experienced colleagues. Participants in the same report felt overwhelmed by or ill prepared to manage district finances when they first entered the position (Klocko et al., 2022). Another study (Burmeister, 2018) found that superintendents from smaller districts believed additional coursework in finance and operations would benefit incoming leaders more than coursework in instruction and curriculum development. Whether incoming superintendents are prepared for developing and overseeing the district budget or not, it is an important aspect of the leadership position (Klocko et al., 2022). Effective superintendents will develop a budget that uses resources to educate students in the most cost-efficient manner possible without jeopardizing the quality of education delivered (Norton et al., 1996).

Another aspect of organizational management includes oversight of facilities and maintenance. Facilities management is not limited to providing a safe and clean learning environment for students, but also includes ensuring the design and function of the space remains inclusive for all patrons (Norton et al., 1996). The U. S. Government Accountability Office (2020) examined the current state of public school facilities. The report revealed that 54% of public school districts needed to update or replace existing facilities and 41% needed to update or replace their current HVAC systems (U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). When referencing district facility priorities, those surveyed reported 92% needed to improve security, 87% needed to expand technology, and 78% needed to improve their ability to monitor possible health hazards (U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). Filardo (2021) reported school districts spent over \$110 billion between the years of 2009-2019 on capital projects, with most of

the projects being funded with local revenue. This reinforces the importance for superintendents to be good stewards of district money

Depending on the district size and organizational structure, the superintendent should oversee a school employee or a contracted service agency who is responsible for district maintenance and custodial tasks (Norton et al., 1996). Whether the space is one currently being used or a future building project for the district, the superintendent should work to provide and maintain healthy, safe, and educational district facilities (Filardo, 2021). Considerations should include curricular and noncurricular use of the facility; technology needs; accessibility for students, staff, and community; staffing for efficient operation of the space; appropriate furnishing; equipment and resources for the space; and future demands and challenges of the space (Norton et al., 1996).

The responsibility of maintaining district facilities is essential for district leaders. Filardo (2021) reported that \$293 billion was spent on capital outlay of elementary and secondary school systems. Highway infrastructure was the only sector that had a higher expenditure for capital outlay (Filardo, 2021). Operating and maintaining district facilities is a significant responsibility that ultimately falls on the superintendent as the district leader who must evaluate and make recommendations about facility needs (Meador, 2019).

The superintendent is not only tasked with managing operations of the district but is also responsible for the development and planning of curriculum (Hoyle, 1993; Meador, 2019; Norton et al., 1996). Depending on the readiness of the professional staff, curriculum planning may be addressed with a different situational leadership approach. As a district leader, the superintendent should first consider the knowledge, willingness,

and eagerness of the staff who will help with the responsibility of curriculum planning and development (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018).

Curriculum Planning and Development. The public school superintendent must be knowledgeable about curriculum planning and development and should be an instructional leader (Hoyle, 1993). Whether the superintendent takes a direct part in the planning of curriculum or delegates this responsibility, it is the duty of the superintendent to ensure the curriculum is aligned to federal, state, and local requirements (Meador, 2019; Norton et al., 1996). The superintendent should keep in mind that by keeping decisions about curriculum decentralized and allowing building-level stakeholders to have a voice, the potential for improvement is more likely to be realized (Norton et al., 1996). This is where a situational leader should look at the readiness of the staff and invite those who are ready, willing, and able to be part of the curriculum team (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018).

Participants who responded to a nationwide superintendent survey (Tienken & Domenech, 2021) reported curriculum and instruction as ninth among responsibilities consuming their time. However, 58% of the same participants described curriculum and instruction experience as being the main influence of why they were hired (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Results from a Swedish study (Stahlkrantz & Rapp, 2020) indicated school board members believe it is the superintendent's role to lead school improvement; however, the same study revealed that poor student achievement is fourth out of five main factors that would warrant a school board to criticize or not renew a superintendent. Regardless of whether the superintendent maintains direct responsibility over curriculum or if it is delegated to someone else in the district, the importance placed on curriculum

will have a direct impact on student achievement and the quality of education (Norton et al., 1996).

Superintendents should be clear when communicating how they plan to work with building leaders and teachers toward improving student achievement (Melton et al., 2019; Norton et al., 1996). The role a superintendent plays in curriculum development has changed over time and continues to evolve (Kowalski, 2006). In the mid 1990s as distributed leadership models became popular in educational settings, the focus of improved student learning began shifting from central office to building-level decision making (Kowalski, 2006). With the current involvement of building-level administration and teacher leaders in curriculum, the superintendent may choose to take an indirect role in curriculum development (Norton et al., 1996). However, it will remain the superintendent's responsibility to establish the organizational framework for curricular issues, as well as establish policy and routine to satisfy state or federal legislation regarding curriculum (Meador, 2019; Norton et al., 1996). Additionally, it is the responsibility of the superintendent to allocate resources for curriculum development and professional development (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018; Norton et al., 1996). District leaders are encouraged to use both local and federal funds to address professional development for leading efforts to improve student achievement (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020).

While curriculum can be described as the road map or agenda for student learning, instruction refers to its delivery or how it is shared (Norton et al., 1996; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). While most superintendents will not always take a direct part in instructional planning, it is their responsibility to establish an organizational framework

that will support the process (Norton et al., 1996). Hence, the sixth standard for school superintendents is instructional management (Hoyle, 1993).

Instructional Management. The superintendent must “exhibit knowledge of instructional management by implementing a system that includes research focusing on learning, instructional strategies, instructional time, advance electronic technologies and resources that maximize student outcomes” (Hoyle, 1993, p. 10). Although the AASA, ISLLC, and PSEL standards all include curriculum and instruction as responsibilities of school leaders, research is limited to the day-to-day duties of the superintendent in these two areas. For this reason, when addressing curriculum and instruction, a leader using the situational leadership approach must look within the district team to identify and include members who are at the fourth level of maturity who are able and have the will and confidence to complete the task of leading instruction (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019; Walls, 2019).

District size may limit how much direct influence a superintendent has over instruction; however, it is still crucial for student success that a superintendent remains involved in instruction (Kowalski, 2006; Norton et al., 1996). In today’s culture of collaboration and distributed leadership, the superintendent may have more of an indirect role in the management of instruction (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018; Kowalski, 2006; Stahlkrantz & Rapp, 2020). The superintendent’s responsibilities should include supervising and evaluating building leaders, recruiting and selecting teaching staff, establishing clear curriculum and learning goals, and planning for financial resources (Kowalski, 2006; Stahlkrantz & Rapp, 2020).

Effective district leaders work regularly with their staff to examine instructional practices and goals (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018). Findings by Carbaugh and Marzano (2018) suggested that effective superintendents continually monitor student achievement and instructional goals. District leaders should prioritize consistency in instruction, define what good teaching really means, and emphasize the need to differentiate to meet student needs (Reeves, 2009). Effective superintendents implement systems that apply research and best practices so every student can succeed (Kowalski, 2006). These systems should regularly review whether what is being taught is focused on academic standards and ensure all students have equitable access to learning (Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Instructional management from the superintendent's position also includes maintaining a positive and growth mindset regarding climate and culture (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019; Kowalski, 2016). District leaders take a proactive role in instructional management by working with instructional teams to develop a shared leadership approach to instruction (Kowalski, 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Shariff, 2020). It is imperative for student success that the approach uses current researched-based, results-driven strategies (Kowalski, 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Shariff, 2020).

Since it is unreasonable to think a superintendent or principal could be an expert in every grade level or content area, instructional teams must be designed to include educators with diverse skill sets (Shariff, 2020). For this reason, the public school superintendent needs to demonstrate the ability to work with district leadership to recruit and manage school personnel effectively (Hoyle, 1993). Consequently, the seventh standard for superintendents is being effective at human resource management (Hoyle, 1993).

Human Resources Management. Human resource management encompasses many responsibilities. Norton et al. (1996) lists six tasks for human resource management: (a) provide recruitment, orientation, development, and compensation of district personnel; (b) provide supervision and evaluation of personnel; (c) provide an atmosphere conducive to discussion of human resource issues, problems, and recommendations; (d) maintain effective communication and professional relationships with employees; (e) provide for a system of compensation and benefits for personnel; and (f) establish a commitment to a program of personal professional development. Responses from Decennial Study of the American Superintendent showed that district leaders reported spending a large percent of their time on personnel management, however the bulk of time was spent addressing personnel issues instead of recruiting, hiring, developing, and growing professional skills of educators (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). For this reason, human resource management must be a shared responsibility within the central office (Norton et al., 1996). As a situational leader, it is important for the superintendent to look at each task and delegate it to staff who show a readiness level to be responsible for that duty (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019; Walls, 2019).

Tienken and Domenech (2021) reported that 80% of a district's budget is used on personnel in the form of salary and benefits. Effective leaders realize the importance of personnel selection, development, and retention; in doing so, appropriate models for professional growth for educators are selected (Burmeister, 2018; Hoyle, 1993; Reeves, 2009). Consequently, it is important for districts to recruit personnel who share the vision for the district (Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Once a district recruits and hires qualified staff, it is important to establish a system to retain them. By maintaining a positive district climate, rich in growth opportunities, a superintendent can attract the right talent and reduce turnover (Cieminski, 2018; Levin et al., 2020; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Another way to attract quality candidates is to partner with universities and preservice programs for potential applicants (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). This may be more difficult to do in smaller or rural districts. Rural superintendents reported inadequate fiscal resources, limited staffing, and geographic isolation hinder their ability to recruit and retain personnel, as well as provide quality professional development (Cadero-Smith, 2020). Thus, it is important for districts to support the staff they already have. Practices district administration can employ to support their staff include fostering supportive and collaborative relationships, providing relevant and meaningful professional development, and being mindful of workloads (Cieminski, 2018; Levin et al., 2020; Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Professional development for teachers has been a focus and priority, but until recently it has not been prioritized for building- and district-level administration (Nguyen, 2019). Bollinger (2019) found that superintendents considered developing personal leadership capacity as a prime concern prior to becoming a superintendent, but once in the administrative role, their priorities shifted to developing the leadership capacity of staff, specifically building principals and teachers. Steeber (2019) revealed that superintendents understand the importance of networking and value the learning that takes place through interacting with colleagues formally and informally. Professional development programs for educational leaders should introduce new strategies to

strengthen management and leadership skills (Cieminski, 2018; Nguyen, 2019). Additional training on evaluating and supporting principal performance would be beneficial to superintendents (Cieminski, 2018; McKim, Hvidston, & Hickman, 2019). McKim et al.'s (2019) study found while principals and superintendents agreed on the importance of principal supervision and evaluations, there were inconsistencies in their views on the involvement and support provided by superintendents. Principals rated active supervision from their superintendent significantly lower than superintendents rated themselves (McKim et al., 2019). Of the principals from another study (Levin et al., 2020) who were considering leaving the profession, half reported that their evaluation system was not useful. Superintendents must work to be more effective at supporting leaders and educators (Levin et al., 2020).

Research shows 8% of teachers leave their profession after one year and over half do not stay in education until retirement (Abitabile, 2020). Levin et al. (2020) found 42% of secondary principals indicated they were considering leaving the education profession. Additionally, some states reported that district leaders have an attrition rate of over 50% after just 3 years (Meyer, Espel, Weston-Sementelli, Melton, & Anguiano, 2020). Consequently, a district leader should work to foster an environment in which school staff want to remain. Teachers reported (Abitabile, 2020) they want honesty and transparency from their administrators. They want to work for leaders who are clear about their beliefs and morals, and work to foster a shared value system that encourages staff to remain in the district (Abitabile, 2020). For this reason, superintendents should look at the importance of how they demonstrate ethical and personal values (Hoyle, 1993).

Values and Ethics of Leadership. School leaders should demonstrate moral and ethical leadership and behave in an ethical manner both personally and professionally (Hoyle, 1993; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Participants in a study involving state superintendents (Fowler, Edwards, & Hsu, 2018) agreed that leading morally and ethically are paramount to building trust and credibility. Regardless of the political stressors and challenges, superintendents must make moral and ethical decisions that are advocated for students (Mitchell, 2019). Additionally, they reported elements that influence their ethical perspective can include race, experience, age, morals, and ethical conduct (Fowler et al., 2018). As stated previously, a situational leader should look at each circumstance and adapt their leadership style based on the readiness of those being affected and the nature of the situation (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019; Walls, 2019). Educational leaders face moral and ethical dilemmas regarding students, personnel, and the institution; therefore, a process should be developed that considers the complexity of the situation and analyzes how it may impact the district and community (Mitchell, 2019; Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Shapiro and Gross (2013) described how the combined use of the turbulence theory, which considers the severity of a situation, and the multiple ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care and profession, can help leaders when addressing ethical dilemmas. The turbulence theory divides ethical dilemmas into four categories of severity: light turbulence, moderate turbulence, severe turbulence, and extreme turbulence (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Leaders can examine the ethical issue and decide if it will minimally affect the normal functioning of the organization or if it could cause more serious implications

or destruction of the organization (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Once the level of turbulence has been identified, the leader should examine the ethical paradigms to determine which one should drive the decision-making process (Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Multiple ethical paradigms include the ethic of justice, which focuses on fairness, equality, and individual freedom (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). It is the foundation for rights and laws (Faddis, 2022). Superintendents and other school leaders should understand the importance of legal and ethical decision making so they can make informed decisions when resolving ethical dilemmas (Stefkovich & Frick, 2021).

The ethic of critique analyzes the laws and policies coming from the ethic of justice (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). The ethic of critique challenges power and privilege (Faddis, 2022). This involves considering who made the laws and policies, when they were made, and who might have their voice silenced by the laws (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefekovich, 2021). Issues that involve class, race, gender, and other areas of difference should be looked at through the lens of the ethic of critique (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). When making decisions through this ethic, a leader must determine if the policies are equitable, just, and right (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefekovich, 2021).

The ethic of care looks at the consequence of decisions, such as who will benefit or who might be hurt by the decision, or what the long-term effects of the decision may be (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). The ethic of care stresses compassion and empathy (Faddis, 2022). Leaders who lead through the lens of care realize the importance of including those who will be affected in the decision-making process (Conroy & Ehrensall, 2021; Mitchell, 2019; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefekovich, 2021). These leaders realize the value of collaboration and hearing the input of stakeholders and showing

concern for how their decisions will impact the school and community (Conroy & Ehrensals, 2021).

Finally, the ethic of profession looks at the standards and codes that have been established for a particular profession (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). These standards are student centered and should be the primary focus when making ethical decisions (Faddis, 2022; Stefkovich & Frick, 2021). Educational leaders should rely on their beliefs, values, and principles, but should ultimately do what is right for the student (Faddis, 2022). When a school leader has a conflict between personal and professional ethics, the ethic of the profession should prevail (Faddis, 2022; Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Negis Isik (2020) showed that ethical leadership has a significant relationship to school effectiveness and job satisfaction of teachers and staff. School leaders should be aware of how they model values and ethics as it will influence the attitudes of their staff and students (Negis Isik, 2020). Therefore, superintendents should develop policies, practices, and programs that will encourage ethical support and behavior within the school (Negis Isik, 2020; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021).

Summary

While data suggests women have made small gains in occupying public school superintendent roles across the United States, there remains a gender inequality in top leadership roles in school districts across the country (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). An added imbalance in public education is the percentage of district leaders who have experience at the elementary level versus those who come from a secondary background. The gender breakdown from the AASA report revealed 74% of American public school superintendents were male while the remaining 26% were female (Tienken & Domenech,

2021). These data indicate an increase of about 2% for women as district leaders (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). However, there is very little data that demonstrate whether or not the background experiences of those leaders are shifting as well. Additionally, a gap in research exists on how previous building-level experience and gender influence public school superintendents' journey to leadership or how they prioritize responsibilities and duties of the position. This imbalance in building-level experience and gender may pose a problem for school districts if the inequity creates an uneven focus on district responsibilities.

There are numerous leadership styles and theories a district leader may pull from while guiding a school system. Situational leadership suggests there is not a single best leadership style, however effective leaders should utilize different styles depending on the situation and the people being led (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). Because situational leadership styles vary depending on specific conditions and relationships, it is important to look at whether gender or previous building-level experience may affect the leaders' response. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the lived experiences and journeys to the superintendency for Missouri public school superintendents. School district leaders with varying building-level experiences were asked to describe their pathway and how their educational experiences shaped their priorities of how they lead their district.

Chapter Three provides information relating to the research design, detailed information regarding participants, research design, instrument, data collection and analysis, and procedures and timelines. An analysis of the results and findings will be

described in Chapter Four. Chapter Five includes conclusions and recommendations for future research.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Leadership practices of public school superintendents determine the effectiveness of the learning environment and ultimately the success of students (Burkman, Garrett, & Posner, 2019). The role of the superintendent at the district level is a high-profile position that is demanding and requires effective leadership that will move a district toward student success (Bjork et al., 2018). Public school superintendents host a multitude of responsibilities. The AASA defines eight standards that district leaders must be skilled in order to effectively support education within their district (Hoyle, 1993). However, there is little or no research on whether these responsibilities are prioritized by the superintendents' previous building-level experience or by gender. Currently there is an imbalance in both building-level experience and gender of public-school superintendents. The most recent data indicate that two thirds of superintendents have no elementary experience (Farmer, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Sperandio, 2015) and nearly three quarters of public school superintendents are male (Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

The situational leadership model suggests effective leaders select the most suitable leadership style based on the followers' readiness level (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019). The approach states there is no single best way to lead; instead, leaders should learn the situation and select a style most appropriate for the ability and willingness of the employees (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019). Reed (2021) showed a leader's ability to adapt based on employee needs was more important than a specific leadership style. A

study (Zohair, Maberah, Darawsha, & Hytham, 2021) of building principals who used the situational leadership approach showed there was no significant differences in the level of situational leadership by gender, qualifications, or years of experience, however, this study was limited to high school principals only. Because situational leadership styles vary depending on specific conditions and relationships, it is important to look at how previous building-level experience and gender of the superintendent may affect decisions and priorities at the district level.

Included in this chapter is an explanation of the research methodology used to describe the lived experiences of 10 Missouri public school superintendents and their pathway to superintendency. The chapter details the purpose of the study, research questions, participants, selection and sampling, research setting, research design, instrumentation, and data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the varying building-level experiences of school leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role. The AASA standards were used to outline superintendent responsibilities. Participants were asked to share how their educational experiences in leadership shaped their priorities for leading their district. Previous research has looked at gender equity within the central office (Bernal et al., 2017; Egri-McCauley, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018; Rodriguez, 2019), but has failed to sufficiently address the gap in building-level experience. Additional research identified there is an imbalance in previous building-level experiences of superintendents but has not made a connection to experience and leadership styles (Dias, 2019; Egri-McCauley,

2019; Farmer, 2007; Jarrett et al., 2018). Tallerico (2000) found most consultants and board members value secondary experience over elementary experience. Gedik and Bellibas (2015) found superintendents showed a difference in their focus on domains of monitoring teaching and learning, maintaining safe environments, and acquiring and allocating funds. Depending on the school board's focus for improvement, strength in one of these areas over another may influence their decision. District boards are searching for candidates who can manage district resources, as well as develop programs (Tallerico, 2000).

Research Questions

The researcher explored the experiences of Missouri public school superintendents regarding their professional experiences and journey to their current position. The central qualitative questions driving the research were the following:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their pathway to superintendency?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their priorities of responsibilities as outlined by the AASA Standards?
 - a. What professional leadership experiences have Missouri public school superintendents had that helped them successfully perform each of these duties?
 - b. What professional leadership experiences were Missouri public school superintendents lacking that could have better prepared them to perform these duties?

Participants

Missouri's public school system includes 518 districts represented by 511 superintendents. An email survey was sent to all Missouri public school superintendents. The DESE established nine RPDCs in the state to represent those districts. The researcher used purposive sampling to identify 10 of the superintendents who responded to the survey questions. The researcher chose to interview one public school superintendent from each of the nine RPDCs and two superintendents from the Southwest Region, known as the Agency for Teaching Leading and Learning (ATLL), which included substantially more districts than the other eight regions (DESE, 2021). The selection of 10 participants allowed a collective story to develop (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Selection and Sampling

Following approval by the Research Review Board at Southwest Baptist University (Appendix A), the researcher emailed (Appendix B) all Missouri public school superintendents to obtain preliminary consent (Appendix C) to participate. Email addresses were obtained through DESE's open access website. The questionnaire (Appendix D) consisted of three parts: (a) demographic questions regarding building-level career path, gender, district size, and tenure as a superintendent, (b) self-reported ranking of prioritization of professional responsibilities according to the AASA superintendent standards, (c) if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who could inform an understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After receiving the initial questionnaire response and consent to participate, the researcher sent a follow-up

email with an interview invitation to one public school superintendent from each of the eight RPDCs and two superintendents from the Southwest Region. Missouri Association of School Administrators considers superintendents with under 3 years' experience to be emerging leaders, and those with 4 or more to be veteran leaders (MASA, 2021). Therefore, the researcher chose to only invite Missouri public school superintendents with at least 3 years of experience at one or more districts in the sampling size. The researcher strived to select an equal number of participants from each level of background experience. Additionally, an equal number of male and female participants was invited to represent both the elementary and secondary levels. Considerations were made by the researcher to protect confidentiality of the participants by assigning codes to limit identifying characteristics. For example, RPDC 1 was coded as P1, while RPDC 2 was coded as P2 and so forth. Demographic information from the 99 Missouri superintendents who responded to the survey is provided in Table 1. Demographic information of the ten interview participants from rural Missouri public schools is found in Table 2. Table 2 provides questionnaire responses from the ten interview participants regarding priority of importance of AASA standards

Table 1

Demographic Information of Respondents from Total Population of Missouri Superintendents

	Count	% of Respondents
RPDC Responses	99	100%
Southeast	6	6.1%
Heart of America	6	6.1%
Kansas City	6	6.1%
Northeast	4	4%
Northwest	10	10%
Southcentral	22	22.2%
Southwest	25	25.3%
St. Louis	4	4%
Central	16	16.2%
Gender		
Male	71	71.7%
Female	28	28.3%
Years of teaching experience at elementary level		
None	51	51.5%
1-5	25	25.3
6-10	9	9.1%
10 +	14	14.1%
Years of administrative experience at elementary level		
None	45	45.5%
1-5	27	27.3%
6-10	17	17.2%
10 +	10	10.01%
Years of teaching experience at secondary level		
None	12	12.1%
1-5	27	27.3%
6-10	40	40.4%
10 +	20	20.2%
Years of administrative experience at secondary level		
None	13	13.1%
1-5	41	41.4%
6-10	26	26.3%
10 +	19	19.2%
Tenure as superintendent		
1-5	49	49.5%
6-10	30	30.3%
10 +	20	20.2%
Current district enrollment		
Less than 500	41	41.4%
501 – 1000	24	24.2%
1001 – 2000	15	15.2%
2000+	19	19.2%

Table 2

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7a	P7b	P8	P9
RPDC	South east	Heart of America	Kansas City	North East	North west	South central	South west	South west	St. Louis	Central
Gender	M	F	M	M	M	F	M		M	F
Years of teaching experience at elementary level	6-10	1-5	0	0	0	0	1-5		0	0
Years of administrative experience at elementary level	6-10	0	0	1-5	0	0	10+		0	10+
Years of teaching experience at secondary level	1-5	0	6-10	10+	10+	10+	0		6-10	6-10
Years of administrative experience at secondary level	1-5	0	6-10	1-5	1-5	1-5	0		6-10	10+
Tenure as superintendent	5	6-10	10+	2	10+	6-10	6-10		10+	10+
Current district enrollment	2000+	501-1000	2000+	<500	2000+	501-1000	501-1000		1001-2000	<500

Research Setting

The research setting was limited geographically to Missouri's 511 public school superintendents. The research for this qualitative study began with an email questionnaire to all 511 superintendents. From those who responded, the researcher purposely contacted 10 respondents for a follow-up interview. Respondents represented the nine RPDCs areas from the state. The researcher used purposive then random sampling by striving to select an equal number of participants from each level of background experience, as well as an equal number of male and female participants to represent both the elementary and secondary levels. Additionally, the researcher selected only Missouri public school superintendents with at least 3 years of experience in one or more districts. Participants were invited by email for an interview with the researcher. Included in the email was an explanation of the purpose of the study and general topics for the interview. The researcher requested permission for the interviews to be recorded. If the participant denied permission to be recorded, the researcher took copious notes to review. Interviews were later transcribed using Otter.ai software and coded to ensure confidentiality and to obtain common themes regarding the lived experiences of participants. Interviews were conducted in the state of Missouri virtually through Google Meet and Zoom. Once the interview and transcriptions were completed, a synopsis of the main points of the interview was sent back to the appropriate participant for member checking. Participants then gave feedback as to accuracy of the transcription and any necessary clarifications were made. During the interviews, superintendents shared their lived experiences and pathways to district leadership.

Research Design

The researcher chose to use a qualitative narrative study to share the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents and their journey to the position. Narrative research is the study of how different people experience the world around them by telling stories from their own lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2018). Narrative research can provide a better understanding of educational issues, relationships, and themes by providing a collection of stories instead of simply looking at numbers and data (Mills & Gay, 2018). In narrative studies the researcher focuses on stories and themes that emerge from participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2018). The goal of this study was to gather information on public school superintendents' lived experiences as they journeyed to district leadership. To obtain a full picture of what was being studied, the researcher used triangulation through the use of a questionnaire in which participants prioritized superintendent standards, open-ended interviews, and archival data from each district such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent messages to triangulate data.

Following the initial questionnaire of public school superintendents, an interview process was used to gather the stories of participating superintendents from across Missouri's public school districts. The interview allowed the participants to share their leadership experiences and how those experiences shaped their preparedness for the district-level position. While the researcher had predetermined questions for each participant, follow-up questions were determined by the participants' responses. After each interview the researcher coded the information to determine common themes. Additionally, the researcher utilized data from the demographic survey of all public

school superintendent respondents, allowing for analysis through comparison to interview answers.

Finally, archival data such as district newsletters, messages from the superintendent, and news articles were reviewed and compared to the survey and interview data in reference to ASAA Standard prioritization. The researcher analyzed these three pieces of information to look for consistencies with current literature. The researcher used the information to establish if current literature and data held true in 2022 for Missouri superintendents.

Instrumentation

Qualitative research is different from quantitative and requires alternative procedures for establishing validation. Some suggestions include demonstrating trustworthiness of the research process and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay 2018). Examples would include practicing reflexivity. Reflexivity encourages the researcher to reveal their own assumptions or biases of the information based on their personal experiences, gender, values, culture, or social class (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One technique used to reduce bias is for the researcher to use journaling throughout the process to remain conscience of any preconceptions or bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay 2018). The researcher for this study chose to journal biases prior to the study. Throughout the analysis process, the journal was referenced to minimize bias entering into results of the study.

Another technique in qualitative research to increase validity and reliability is the use of triangulation, or the process of using multiple sources of data to cross check and establish dependability of information and get a more complete picture of the story being

told (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2018). Demographic information gathered from the email questionnaire regarding building-level career path, gender, district size, and tenure as a superintendent was used for this study; additionally, for triangulation purposes in this study the researcher used (a) self-reported prioritization of professional responsibilities according to the AASA superintendent standards included on the questionnaire, (b) information obtained through interviews, and (c) district archival data such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent messages to triangulate data. If someone were to reproduce this study, results may vary as each district leader enters the position with different life experiences.

The researcher assumed that participants were honest in their answers and shared their experiences openly as they remembered them. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using online software, Google Meet or Zoom, and Otter.ai. Participants were able to review their transcript and provide clarification prior to final data results being reported.

Procedures

Once the participants responded to the initial email questionnaire and agreed to participate by using the informed consent link, public school superintendents with 3 or more years of district-level leadership experience who agreed to continue with the interviewing process were invited individually to a virtual interview using either Google Meet or Zoom depending on their preference. The researcher had prepared open-ended questions to be used during the 30-45 minute interview. The researcher started by reviewing the purpose of the research study and encouraged participants to be open in their answers, ensuring confidentiality in the write-up, noting no superintendent or

district names would be used. Follow-up questions were asked depending on the participants' responses. Participants were thanked for their time and participation. Each participant was given an opportunity to add additional information if they desired. The researcher informed the participants how the information was going to be analyzed and reported. The participants were told they would receive an email with a transcript of the interview for them to verify and provide clarification prior to final data results being reported.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended using a data analysis spiral to analyze data of narrative research. The spiral consists of organizing the data, reading and memoing, describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes, and finally representing and visualizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method helps the researcher to develop an authentic narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study the researcher recorded the interviews and later used Otter.ai to transcribe the information. Next, the researcher organized the data from the interviews and questionnaires by themes related to superintendent standards.

Once the information was transcribed and organized, the researcher did several readings and rereading of the transcripts. Additionally, the researcher watched the recordings of each interview to gather general impressions of the participants' tone of voice and emotion expressed throughout the interview. Field notes were made by the researcher while reading the transcripts and while watching the recordings. The researcher's journal of biases was referenced to minimize any inclusions of preconceived notions.

The researcher used Otter.ai software to transcribe the recorded interviews into a detailed transcript of the conversation. All unnecessary words were removed that were redundant, words such as “um” and “hmm” from the transcript during the initial reading. Utilizing Otter.ai technology helped with grouping and coding responses for final analysis. Units of meaning were identified by the researcher, who also took careful consideration to look at the context of the conversation and check for themes that may have been missed. The results were then compiled into a spreadsheet to identify the commonalities of each theme (Peoples, 2021). Themes were reviewed with consideration toward AASA Standards. For an idea to be considered an experience by “most” participants the idea had to show up in at least 6 of 10 interviews. If an idea was presented in three to five transcripts, or 30-50%, it was labeled as “many.” Any relevant 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 participants (Peoples, 2021).

Themes that were generated were then compared to the self-reported priority rankings of the AASA Standards to determine consistency of the responses. The researcher sought to use demographic information regarding gender and building-level experience to determine if either played a role in superintendents’ priorities. Additionally, interview responses and survey data were analyzed to determine if they were consistent with findings from the literature review.

Finally, the researcher added to the information provided by the survey responses and interviews by using district archival data such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent messages. Superintendents are not required to provide this type of

communication to the public, therefore the amount of information and the mode in which it was delivered varied from district to district. The information was used to support or contradict information provided by the superintendents' survey and interview responses. For example, if a participant ranked Standard 3: Communication and Community Relations as a top priority but did not communicate to stakeholders regularly through newsletters, social media, or through another mode, this was seen by the researcher as inconsistent to information provided by the superintendent.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the varying building-level experiences of public school district leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role. Data suggest that there is an imbalance in both building-level experience and gender of district leaders. Because of the host of decisions superintendents make for their district, it is important to look at how previous building-level experience and gender of the superintendent may affect decisions and priorities at the district level.

Chapter Three explained the methodology of the study including participants, research setting, research design, instrumentation, interview process, and data collection. In Chapter Four, the findings of the study will be presented. Chapter Five will contain a summary of the study along with recommendations for further research.

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

Superintendents lead over 13,000 public school districts nationwide (Taie & Goldring, 2020). These leaders should know how to build relationships, manage staff, engage members of the school board, consider equity and inclusion for all students and staff, and oversee district finances and student academics (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Considering the host of responsibilities of the superintendent position, one could assume that candidates come from varied demographics. However studies indicate that the majority of United States public school superintendents are White, married males with secondary principal experience (Glass et al., 2000; Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Missouri public school administrators tend to follow national statistics with 33% of superintendents having any type of elementary certification (DESE, 2021). Additionally, there is evidence of gender imbalance nationally with 74% of the positions being occupied with male leaders (Tienken & Domenech, 2021).

Situational leadership was used as the framework for this study. Situational leadership theory states that a leader adjusts their leadership behaviors according to the current situation, the needs of the organization, and the preparedness of the employees (Dinibutun, 2020; Henkel et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2021). The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the varying building-level experiences of school leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role.

The researcher emailed all 511 Missouri public school superintendents to obtain preliminary consent to participate in an online survey questionnaire consisting of three parts: (a) demographic questions regarding building-level career path, gender, district size, and tenure as a superintendent; (b) self-reported ranking of prioritization of professional responsibilities according to the AASA superintendent standards; and (c) a request to participate in a follow-up interview. Ninety-nine superintendents responded to the survey. Of those who responded 43 agreed to be considered for a follow-up interview through Google Meet or Zoom. The researcher chose to interview one public school superintendent from each of the nine RPDCs and two superintendents from the Southwest Region, which included substantially more districts than the other eight regions (DESE, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Missouri public school superintendents. Each interview participant had at least 3 years of superintendent experience. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the 10 participants, five male and five female, which is detailed below under participants. Upon completion of the interviews, transcripts and researcher notes were reviewed to identify common themes that emerged from the interviews.

In Chapter Four, data will be presented that describes the survey responses from the 99 participants, as well as a description of the interview participants and setting of the research study. The information presented from the interviews will address the main the central qualitative questions driving the research:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their pathway to superintendency?

2. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their priorities of responsibilities as outlined by the AASA Standards?
 - a. What professional leadership experiences have Missouri public school superintendents had that helped them successfully perform each of these duties?
 - b. What professional leadership experiences were Missouri public school superintendents lacking that could have better prepared them to perform these duties?

Participants

Participants who responded to the online survey questionnaire represented all nine RPDCs in Missouri. Ninety-nine responses to the survey were received. Gender representation of the survey included 71 male and 28 female respondents. Over 45% of the participants had no leadership experience at the elementary level, while 13% had no leadership experience at the secondary level. Districts with fewer than 500 students were represented by 41% of the respondents, while larger districts with over 2,000 students were represented by almost 20% of the superintendents. Nearly half of the respondents had 5 or fewer years of experience as a superintendent. Table 1 provides demographic information from the 99 respondents to the questionnaire.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Respondents from Total Population of Missouri Superintendents

	Count	% of Respondents
RPDC Responses	99	100%
Southeast	6	6.1%
Heart of America	6	6.1%
Kansas City	6	6.1%
Northeast	4	4%
Northwest	10	10%
Southcentral	22	22.2%
Southwest	25	25.3%
St. Louis	4	4%
Central	16	16.2%
Gender		
Male	71	71.7%
Female	28	28.3%
Years of teaching experience at elementary level		
None	51	51.5%
1-5	25	25.3
6-10	9	9.1%
10 +	14	14.1%
Years of administrative experience at elementary level		
None	45	45.5%
1-5	27	27.3%
6-10	17	17.2%
10 +	10	10.01%
Years of teaching experience at secondary level		
None	12	12.1%
1-5	27	27.3%
6-10	40	40.4%
10 +	20	20.2%
Years of administrative experience at secondary level		
None	13	13.1%
1-5	41	41.4%
6-10	26	26.3%
10 +	19	19.2%
Tenure as superintendent		
1-5	49	49.5%
6-10	30	30.3%
10 +	20	20.2%
Current district enrollment		
Less than 500	41	41.4%
501 – 1000	24	24.2%
1001 – 2000	15	15.2%
2000+	19	19.2%

Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants. Ten participants who met the following criteria for gender, building-level experience, and superintendent experience were chosen to develop a collective story. Five male participants and five female participants were selected to be interviewed. Participants represented both elementary and secondary leadership and teaching experiences. One male and one female were selected who had mainly elementary teaching and leading experience, and one male and one female participant were selected who had mainly secondary teaching and leading experience. The other six participants had varied building-level experience. The researcher attempted to select from participants who had at least 3 years of superintendent experience. The selection started with looking at RPDCs with the least amount of participation to find a candidate that met the criteria. For example, the Southeast RPDC had only one response. The person met the criteria so he was chosen automatically. Next, regions that had multiple candidates that met the criteria were reviewed. If there was more than one candidate who met the criteria in any given region a random number was assigned to the candidate and an auto generator was used to select the candidate. Only two participants from the Northeast region volunteered to be interviewed. Both of those participants had fewer than 3 years of experience. After reaching out to multiple districts and the RPDC coordinator for the Northeast region, the researcher was not able to obtain a participant with at least 3 years of experience for the interview portion. Therefore, Participant 4 did not meet the superintendent experience profile, however an interview was conducted in order to have a more well-rounded statewide viewpoint. Table 2 provides demographic information of the 10 interview participants.

Table 2

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7a	P7b	P8	P9
RPDC	South east	Heart of America	Kansas City	North East	North west	South central	South west	South west	St. Louis	Central
Gender	M	F	M	M	F	F	M	F	M	F
Years of teaching experience at elementary level	6-10	1-5	0	0	0	0	1-5	1-5	0	0
Years of administrative experience at elementary level	6-10	0	0	1-5	0	0	10+	0	0	10+
Years of teaching experience at secondary level	1-5	0	6-10	10+	10+	10+	0	6-10	6-10	6-10
Years of administrative experience at secondary level	1-5	0	6-10	1-5	1-5	1-5	0	1-5	6-10	10+
Tenure as superintendent	5	6-10	10+	2	10+	6-10	6-10	6-10	10+	10+
Current district enrollment	2000+	501-1000	2000+	<500	2000+	501-1000	501-1000	<500	1001-2000	<500

Participant P1 was a male superintendent who was in his 4th year of district leadership. He had experience at both the elementary and secondary levels, but had served more at the elementary level. His current district enrollment was greater than 2,000 students.

Participant P2 was a female district leader who had more than 6 years of experience as a superintendent. She had only taught at the elementary level, but had district wide leadership experience as a program director. She worked in a district with 501-1,000 students.

Participant P3 was a male superintendent who had more than 10 years of experience as a superintendent. He had both teaching and leading experience at the

secondary level, and no experience at the elementary level. His district had an enrollment of 2,000+ students.

Participant P4 was a male leader in his second year as a superintendent. He had elementary leadership experience, but no elementary teaching experience. He had taught and led at the secondary level. He led a district with fewer than 500 students.

Participant P5 was a female superintendent with more than 6 years of experience as a district leader. She had both teaching and leading experience at the secondary level and no elementary experience. Her current district had more than 2,000 students enrolled.

Participant P6 was a female district leader who had more than 6 years of experience as a superintendent. She had both teaching and leading experience at the secondary level and no elementary experience. She currently worked in a district with an enrollment of 501-1,000 students.

Participant P7a was a male superintendent with more than 6 years of experience as a district leader. He had both teaching and leading experience at the elementary level and no secondary experience. His current district had 501-1000 students enrolled.

Participant P7b was a female district leader who had more than 6 years of superintendent experience. She had teaching experience at the elementary level, and teaching and leading experience at the secondary level. Her current district had an enrollment of fewer than 500 students.

Participant P8 was a male superintendent with more than 6 years of experience as a district leader. Participant 8 had no elementary experience but had led and taught at the secondary level. He currently worked in a district with an enrollment of 1,001-2,000 students.

Participant P9 was a female district leader who had more than 6 years of experience as a superintendent. She had experience at both the elementary and secondary levels, but had spent more time at the secondary level. Her current district had fewer than 500 students.

Data Analysis

To increase validity and reliability in this qualitative study, triangulation, or the process of using multiple sources of data to cross check and establish dependability of information, was used to obtain a more complete picture of the story being told (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2018). Demographic information gathered from the email questionnaire regarding building-level career path, gender, district size, and tenure as a superintendent was used for this study; additionally, for triangulation purposes in this study the researcher used (a) self-reported prioritization of professional responsibilities according to the AASA superintendent standards included on the questionnaire, (b) information obtained through interviews, and (c) district archival data such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent messages to triangulate data. If someone were to reproduce this study, results might vary as each district leader enters the position with different life experiences.

Information was collected from the self-reported prioritization of professional responsibilities of AASA superintendent standards included on the questionnaire. Data from the survey rankings were used to create a table to identify if certain standards were prioritized more than others. Instead of placing the eight standards in rank order some of the survey participants listed the standards as all being either a 1 or a 2, meaning they thought all of the standards were of high priority. Results from the prioritization of

standards showed that three most prioritized standards by all participants were Standard 1 - Leadership and District Culture, Standard 8 - Values and Ethics of Leadership, and Standard 3 - Communications and Community Relations. Male respondents also viewed Standard 4 – Organizational Management as equally important as Standard 3 - Communications and Community Relations. Female respondents, on the other hand, viewed Standard 2 – Policy and Governance as a higher priority than Standard 3 - Communications and Community Relations or Organizational Management. Backgrounds in building-level experience seemed to have no bearing on how the standards were prioritized. Table 3 shows the percent of responses of the 99 participants who listed each standard as a high priority by ranking them either a 1 or a 2 out of 8.

Table 3

Priority of Importance of Standards of Respondents From Total Population of Missouri Superintendents

Percent of highest priority by:	All	Males	Females	With elementary teaching background	With elementary administrative background	With secondary teaching background	With secondary administrative background
Priority Ranking of Standard 1 - <i>Leadership and district culture</i>	75	76	75	38	42	66	65
Priority Ranking of Standard 2 - <i>Policy and governance</i>	45	45	46	25	24	38	40
Priority Ranking of Standard 3 - <i>Communications and community relations</i>	51	55	43	27	29	46	45
Priority Ranking of Standard 4 - <i>Organizational management</i>	39	55	39	18	21	34	36
Priority Ranking of Standard 5 - <i>Curriculum planning and development</i>	23	24	21	14	11	18	19
Priority Ranking of Standard 6 - <i>Instructional Management</i>	31	34	29	17	19	25	28
Priority Ranking of Standard 7 - <i>Human resources management</i>	37	37	39	21	20	30	32
Priority Ranking of Standard 8 - <i>Values and ethics of leadership</i>	61	65	54	29	32	53	52

Table 4 shows results of the survey ranking of the 10 interview participants.

Because not all participants put the standards in priority ranking, the researcher chose to list standards that were ranked with a 1 or 2 as high priority, those listed as a 3, 4, 5, or 6 as medium priority, and those listed as 7 or 8 as low priority.

Table 4

Priority of Importance of Standards Responses From Interview Participants
HP – High Priority, MP – Medium Priority, LP – Lower Priority

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7a	P7b	P8	P9
Priority Ranking of Standard 1 - <i>Leadership and district culture</i>	HP	HP	MP	HP	HP	MP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Priority Ranking of Standard 2 - <i>Policy and governance</i>	LP	HP	HP	HP	HP	HP	MP	MP	MP	LP
Priority Ranking of Standard 3 - <i>Communications and community relations</i>	HP	HP	HP	HP	HP	MP	MP	MP	MP	MP
Priority Ranking of Standard 4 - <i>Organizational management</i>	MP	HP	MP	HP	HP	HP	LP	MP	MP	LP
Priority Ranking of Standard 5 - <i>Curriculum planning and development</i>	LP	HP	LP	HP	MP	MP	HP	LP	LP	MP
Priority Ranking of Standard 6 - <i>Instructional Management</i>	MP	MP	MP	HP	HP	MP	HP	LP	LP	MP
Priority Ranking of Standard 7 - <i>Human resources management</i>	MP	HP	LP	HP	HP	LP	MP	MP	MP	MP
Priority Ranking of Standard 8 - <i>Values and ethics of leadership</i>	MP	HP	MP	HP	HP	MP	MP	HP	HP	HP

Coding

The second part of triangulation was the use of information from the interviews. Ten interviews were recorded using Zoom and were transcribed using Otter.ai. Each recording was reviewed and notes were made to cross reference with the transcripts. Additionally, member checking was used. This is a strategy where transcripts of the individual interviews were shared with the corresponding participants in order for them to review and verify for accuracy. Participants were also asked if they wanted to add or edit their responses. No edits were requested by any of the participants.

Once the interviews were transcribed texts that were incorrect based on listening to the audio recording of the interview were revised. A Google spreadsheet was used to track the frequency of terms by each participant. Otter.ai lists the 20 most common terms of each interview transcript. There were variations of multiple terms such as community, stakeholders, and people along with words like teachers, staff, and personnel. Words with the same basic meaning were combined into similar categories in order to generate the frequency totals. Table 5 identifies the top 20 common terms used by all 10 interviewees.

Table 5

Common Code Terms Used per Participant in Interview Transcript

Term	All	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7a	P7b	P8	P9
Community (people, stakeholders)	162	11	18	22	19	18	12	12	18	33	9
Superintendent	165	15	18	14	14	23	21	5	19	14	22
School district (district)	130	21	12	9	9	23	21	5	12	11	7
Students (kids)	121	17	14	10	16	15	6	8	8	20	7
Experiences	96	9	9	7	21	6	14	3	10	9	8
Teachers (staff, personnel)	96	6	4	8	16	6	17	4	11	15	9
Collaborate (input, committees, consensus)	94	6	3	8	4	5	13	4	18	22	11
Decisions	71	9	4	8	7	9	6	7	4	15	2
Finance (budget, financial management, money)	62	3	2	15	6	6	20	1	5	3	1
School Board (board)	55	4	2	2	12	3	12	4	7	5	4
Communication (transparency)	46	2	6	6	5	0	3	3	11	8	2
High School	44	1	1	1	2	13	15	0	6	3	2
Leadership (leader, admin)	39	4	4	1	6	6	4	0	2	6	6
Involved (activities, events, visible)	39	0	3	6	4	5	4	5	3	8	1
Impact (make a difference)	35	4	4	7	2	0	0	0	0	11	7
Plan (goals)	29	1	1	0	7	0	2	6	1	6	5
Special Education (SPED)	22	1	9	0	8	1	3	0	0	0	0
Coaching	21	0	0	2	11	0	0	5	2	1	0
Academics (instruction, curriculum)	20	0	1	0	5	6	1	2	3	1	4
Ethics (values, integrity, honesty)	17	2	0	3	3	0	0	0	2	4	3

Themes

Prior to rereading the transcripts the researcher reviewed personal journals that were created prior to the interviews to reduce bias throughout the process and remain conscious of any preconceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay 2018). The reading of the transcripts allowed for a better understanding of each participant's experiences as a superintendent. Common coded terms were reviewed and a third reading of the transcripts followed. Using the common terms the researcher highlighted parts of the conversations and used Post-it notes to identify themes that emerged with each interview. For an idea to be considered an experience by "most" participants the idea had to show up in at least 6 of 10 interviews. If an idea was presented in three to five transcripts, or 30-50%, it was labeled as "many." Any relevant ideas that showed up in interviews but not more than three would be classified as "some." These various classifications allowed for a general description of the lived experiences of the participants (Peoples, 2021). Throughout this process some common themes surfaced. Themes were also compared to the findings in the literature review regarding the superintendent standards. Themes that emerged were ☺ a) desire to make a greater impact, (b) the importance of being visible and involved, (c) decisions are made with a student first mentality, and (d) knowledge of fiscal management is a priority.

Desire to make a greater impact. When asked about what led to their desire to become a superintendent most of the respondents (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7a, P8, P9) referred to the ability to make a greater impact on students and the district as a whole. Participant 8 (P8) mentioned specifically the impact he hoped to make:

So for me it was about having a more global impact. When you're in the classroom it's direct with the students. When you're in leadership, it's really working with the adults to have that impact on students. For me it was an opportunity to take greater responsibility to impact more kids in more meaningful ways, and hopefully have a lasting impact on students and also the adults in the organization.

Evidence of his goal to make an impact was clear in district archival information. Participant 8 had frequent and recent social media posts about working with kids, attending events, and building community relations in general. District information on the website also provided specific goals they had for student growth.

Other participants echoed the desire to make a larger impact. They shared their path from teacher to other leadership roles and how with each role came more opportunity to impact a greater number of students. Participant 9 (P9) remembered:

Motivation (for becoming a superintendent) was not there at first. It was something that was developed, as I learned that I could not just impact the students in my classroom, but could have a greater impact by building the capacity of staff members who then would have a greater impact on students.

Supporting information was located on the district website as well as with professional organization memberships showing her encouragement for professional learning and growth of her staff.

The motivation for having a greater impact was not limited to just students, but to teachers, staff, and the district as a whole. Nearly all of the participants mentioned the realization that they could help the district grow and improve in general. This was also

supported in the survey ranking of Standard 1 -Leadership and District Culture from the 99 Missouri respondents, with 75% listing this as a high priority.

Importance of being visible and involved. Throughout the interviews most of the participants referenced the importance of being visible and involved. This was evident in the AASA standard rankings with the 99 respondents as well. Communications and community relations was listed as one of the top three prioritized standards. Comparable were the results from Tienken and Domenech (2021), where 96% of superintendents indicated they were actively involved in their community.

In this study, nearly all of the interview participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7a, P7b, P8, P9) referenced community involvement specifically when answering the question of what their community expects of them as a leader. Others noted the importance by specifying things they do to get involved and stay acquainted with the community, staff, and students. Participant 1 (P1) talked about an ordinary day in the life of superintendency:

Today I was able to serve pancakes this morning. I had a community meeting at noon. I got to read to kindergartners just a bit ago. I am reviewing information for a board meeting tonight. The challenges are great, but I love it.

When responding to what she thought the community expects from their superintendent, Participant 2 (P2) recalled the desire from the community regarding qualities from a previous superintendent:

When they opened the (superintendent) position, they were looking for pieces that were missing (from the previous superintendent). Community involvement and engagement were a huge piece of that. The previous superintendent was a

fantastic person and a fantastic superintendent but they weren't well versed in the community. Now there isn't that much of an expectation about that because they (my community) know that I do it, and it helps when you're from the community. Information on P2's district website supports this claim by having various ways for the community to get involved in the district. The website had upcoming event and activity information, a parent and community survey link easily accessible, and a link available to sign up for digital newsletters.

Other interview participants listed attending or supervising athletic activities, joining business organizations, serving on Chamber of Commerce committees, and various other avenues in which they stay visible and involved in the community. Not only did they believe the community expected it, most participants seemed to enjoy the engagement and interaction with everyone. Additionally, being visible and involved was a theme supported by the survey rankings from the 99 Missouri superintendents who responded. Standard 3 – Communication and Community Relations was listed as the third highest priority with 51% of participants listing it as one of the highest priorities.

Students first. When asked what considerations were made when making district decisions 5 of the 10 participants (P1, P2, P3, P7a, P9) specifically mentioned doing what is right for students. Having a student first mindset was made clear to the researcher by the priorities of Standard 8- Values and Ethics of Leadership. This standard was listed as the second highest priority of the 99 survey respondents. In the literature review the researcher found that Standard 8 is student centered and should be the primary focus when making ethical decisions (Faddis, 2022; Stefkovich & Frick, 2021). Educational leaders should rely on their beliefs, values, and principles, but should ultimately do what

is right for the student (Faddis, 2022). Participants also stated they consider how the decision will affect the district as a whole and district goals. Participant 3 (P3) put it this way:

I would hope that anybody in this role looks at how those decisions are going to impact students first and foremost. We should always be about the kids and I think impacting the district a whole becomes more prevalent. Not just kids but then your community, your teachers and all of those components.

Participant 5 (P5) added that sometimes decisions may not be popular, but if she is looking out for students, she feels comfortable with the decision.

I'm someone who believes in making the best decision for the most people; in doing what's right and best for students, teachers and the community. It drives most of my decisions. Sometimes when I make a decision, it may not be popular or people may question why I did that. But I've got to take care of our students that are here.

Other participants answered similarly. When asked what the community expected of her as a leader as well as what people should consider when looking at the superintendency, P9 included the following statements:

I think they would say that they expect me to look out for their kids. And they expect high standards for their kids, which is phenomenal. Because it all goes back to our kids. And how do we take this and focus on our kids and the great things that we're doing?

District archival information supported the student first mentality. Student recognition was highlighted on most of the district apps and webpages. Several board

meeting agendas showed where time had been set aside to acknowledge students and programs.

Fiscal management. Finances and budgeting were mentioned by all interview participants. Many participants (P2, P4, P6, P8) mentioned the influence budget and finance exert when considering decisions for the district, but nearly all of the participants talked about the importance of fiscal management and knowledge when referencing experiences that helped or were missing in their preparation for the superintendent position. Participants 3, 4, and 5 indicated that the community expected them to be a good financial manager and wanted a superintendent that assured them of financial security and transparency. Participant 4 shared that consolidation of their district with neighboring districts had been a real possibility in the past. He talked of how the community needed a superintendent who would make decisions that support the preservation of their district. Participant 4 shared: “They’re looking for a champion of the small rural school, you know. Is this going to be the guy who’s going to fight for us to keep us open and make the decisions necessary to support our school?” Evidence supporting fiscal responsibility and transparency was observed by looking at district websites and by using DESE’s open-access database. While some districts had more information than others, financial information regarding revenue and expenditures was clear and easily accessible.

Fiscal management was mentioned as one area where participants felt they lacked preparation as they assumed the superintendent role. Participants who had budgeting experience, whether in district duties such as administration, coaching, or club sponsorship, or in personal small business roles, stated that those experiences helped

them when it came to the fiscal management responsibilities of superintendency.

Participant 6 stated her experience managing a club budget as well as student council helped as she entered a new role, but even that was not enough. She mentioned how she did not think most teachers understood the delicate balance that goes into the district budget. An example she provided was how allowing for a 3% raise goes on forever and before becoming a superintendent one probably does not have that perspective.

Participant 7b talked about what is involved in a building project, the steps of passing a bond issue, and the importance of maintaining a level head when making such significant financial decisions.

Participant 3 talked about financial management several different times during the conversation. He not only felt the community expected their superintendent to be honest and a good financial manager, he also mentioned the importance of fiscal responsibility in preparation for the position. He shared that although he gained some budgeting experience as a principal he did not feel that his graduate courses adequately prepared him for the intensity of managing a district budget.

Participants 1, 5, 6, and 7b also shared they felt as a new superintendent they were lacking some of the necessary financial knowledge when it came to the responsibilities of understanding and managing a district budget. Participant 6 stated,

Nobody is prepared for special programs, SPED budgets and Title budgets. When I took a class as a doctoral candidate I learned a lot, but until you actually have hands on and have to do it (budget) you don't understand what it looks like.

The importance of preparation in fiscal management resonated throughout the interview process. The responses received through this researcher's interviews with

Missouri superintendents were similar to feedback given through a national survey.

Tienken and Domenech (2021) showed participants ranked fiscal stewardship as the most critical area facing superintendents since they are charged with the responsibility of local, state, and federal monies. The researcher was unable to confirm if the survey responses from the 99 Missouri superintendents supported this as well. According to the AASA standards fiscal management falls under Standard 4 – Organizational Management. This study’s survey data revealed only 39% of the 99 participants ranked this as high priority.

Research Questions

This study explored the experiences of Missouri public school superintendents regarding their professional experiences and journey to their current position. The study was guided by a two central qualitative questions and two sub-questions:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their pathway to superintendency?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their priorities of responsibilities as outlined by the AASA Standards?
 - a. What professional leadership experiences have Missouri public school superintendents had that helped them successfully perform each of these duties?
 - b. What professional leadership experiences were Missouri public school superintendents lacking that could have better prepared them to perform these duties?

The goal of the study was to determine through survey responses, interviews, and review of district artifacts if Missouri public school superintendents with differing building-level experiences and gender described their priorities of responsibilities similarly or differently than superintendents with comparable backgrounds. Additionally, the researcher hoped to gain insight into whether or not participants felt that specific experiences helped them feel more prepared for certain responsibilities, and if participants felt inadequately prepared for other duties as a result of their experiences or lack thereof.

An interview protocol (Appendix F) with questions designed around the main research questions and sub questions was developed. After reviewing recordings and transcripts from each of the interviews and looking at the survey data, it was determined that although common themes emerged regarding preparation and readiness for the position, there was no connection in superintendent responses related to building-level experience or gender.

Summary

This goal of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the lived experiences and journeys to the superintendency for Missouri public school superintendents. School district leaders with varying building-level experiences were asked to describe their pathway to their current role as superintendent and how their educational experiences shaped their priorities of how they lead their district. Chapter Four revealed themes and findings that emerged from survey results, interview responses, and district archival information. The findings from this research study were intended to add to the body of

literature assisting administrators and local school boards seeking candidates for leadership roles.

Chapter Five will contain an examination of data collected through surveys, themes that emerged from interviews and district archival data, and a discussion of general findings from the study. Additionally, recommendations for future research will be noted. Finally, a conclusion will be provided aimed at helping fill the gap in literature regarding whether or not building-level experience and gender help determine how superintendents lead and make decisions for their districts.

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The American public school superintendent position is one that is central to the success of district children in the United States. The superintendent makes multiple decisions every day that affect the whole school community. “Superintendents continuously face the difficult choice of deciding whether a problem should be approached on the basis of expertise, shared decision making or both” (Kowalski, 2006, p. 44). To accomplish these tasks the public school superintendent must find a balance and also gain the trust and cooperation of teachers, principals, school board members, community officials, and ultimately, the students (Engel, 2020; Hill & Jochim, 2018).

Because the weight of this position is so important, research of the American school superintendent began in 1923 and has since continued with the most recent study being conducted in 2020. The most recent AASA study (Tienken & Domenech, 2021) found that although the percentage of women and men of color in the position is increasing, the majority of school superintendents (91.38%) tend to be White males. The study also looked at the career pathway and experiences of school superintendents. However, the study failed to look at how or whether building-level experience guided superintendent decisions.

Situational leadership theory suggests there is no single best way to lead; instead, leaders should look at the situation and select a style most appropriate for the ability and willingness of the employees (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Walls, 2019). This researcher used the situational leadership model as the framework for this study. The purpose of this

qualitative narrative study was to explore the varying building-level experiences of school leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role. The study was guided by two central qualitative questions and two sub-questions:

1. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their pathway to superintendency?
2. How do Missouri public school superintendents with varying building-level experiences describe their priorities of responsibilities as outlined by the AASA Standards?
 - a. What professional leadership experiences have Missouri public school superintendents had that helped them successfully perform each of these duties?
 - b. What professional leadership experiences were Missouri public school superintendents lacking that could have better prepared them to perform these duties?

Chapter Five will include summary findings, discussion of the lived experiences of Missouri public school superintendents who participated in the study, implications of findings, and recommendations for further studies.

Summary of Findings

The study had two components, a survey questionnaire of self-reported prioritization of professional responsibilities according to the AASA superintendent standards, and semi-structured interviews to capture 10 participants' lived experiences of their pathway to superintendency. The study allowed the researcher to address how or

whether gender and building-level experience guide superintendents' priorities in decision making. Situational leadership was used as the theoretical framework for the study.

All 511 Missouri public school superintendents were given an opportunity to complete a Google survey that included demographic information regarding building-level career path, gender, district size, and tenure as a superintendent, as well as a self-prioritization of AASA superintendent standards. Ninety-nine superintendents participated in this portion of the study, making a total of 19%. Additionally, 10 superintendents, of the 99 who responded, participated in a follow-up interview conducted through Zoom at their convenience. Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants. One public school superintendent was chosen from each of the nine RPDCs and two superintendents from the Southwest Region, which included substantially more districts than the other eight regions (DESE, 2021). Five male participants and five female participants were selected to be interviewed. The researcher attempted to allow for equal representation from both elementary and secondary experiences.

Data were gathered from the survey responses to create a table (Table 3) identifying whether certain standards were prioritized more than others. Additionally, upon completion of the semi-structured interviews transcripts and researcher notes were coded to identify common themes that emerged. The researcher worked to examine what experiences were highlighted on the pathway to superintendency, as well as what common themes were shared while acting as a district leader. Throughout review of data common themes surfaced. Themes that emerged were: (a) desire to make a greater

impact, (b) the importance of being visible and involved, (c) decisions are made with a student first mentality, and (d) knowledge of fiscal management is a priority. Finally, district archival data such as news articles, district newsletters, and superintendent messages, as well as DESE's open access database, were used to support findings from the surveys and interviews.

Seven of the 10 interview participants referenced the importance and ability to make greater impact while acting as the superintendent. The desire to make a greater impact on students was shared among most of the participants. Interviewees who talked about student impact remembered how being in the classroom gave them the ability to reach 20-25 students. As they moved into assistant principal, principal, or director roles, participants could impact greater numbers. However, as superintendent they could reach all students, and have a positive impact on staff and the community.

All 10 participants referenced the importance of community involvement during the interview. Nine specifically cited community relations and involvement as expectations the school community had. Community relations and communications was a priority in the overall survey ranking as well. More than half of the 99 participants listed Standard 3 as one of the top three priorities. Information about getting involved in the school community as well as the district community was supported by interview participants. Some of the superintendents talked about being involved in civic organizations while others described volunteer opportunities. The overall enthusiasm shared when talking about community involvement was evident in each interview.

A student first mentality was given by half of the 10 interview participants as a priority when making district decisions. Hart (2018) examined factors that might

influence superintendents' overall decision making. The study revealed superintendents tend to make decisions based off what is best for students, followed by what the perception of public opinion will be (Hart, 2018). Interview participants seemed to agree with Hart's findings. When disciplining a student, one superintendent described the thought process of considering who will be affected by the outcome. This process ties back to Shapiro and Gross' (2013) ethical decision-making model. The Ethic of Care considers who will be affected in the decision-making process (Conroy & Ehrensall, 2021; Mitchell, 2019; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Participant survey rankings showed the importance of values and ethics as well. Standard 8 was ranked as the second highest in priorities of AASA standards.

Fiscal management, budgeting, and finance were addressed by all 10 interview participants, whether it was in reference to decision making or preparation for becoming a superintendent. The Decennial Study of the American Superintendent (Tienken & Domenech, 2021) asked participants to list issues that consumed the most time. Finance was listed as the most time consuming. The importance of fiscal stewardship seemed to be shared by the interview participants. Some of the participants seemed to be more prepared than others when accepting the position for the first time. Reasons for preparedness varied from managing budgets within school responsibilities of coaching or supervising clubs, to managing a building budget as a principal. Others talked about experiences outside of school such as small business ownership and the financial responsibility that comes with it. Some of the participants wished for more knowledge of working with a district budget before taking the position. Regardless of the experience

with finance and budget, or lack thereof, all of the interview participants expressed the importance of fiscal management.

Discussion

The goal of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the lived experiences and journeys to the superintendency for Missouri public school superintendents. Surveys were used to find information on district leaders' priorities while leading. Zoom interviews with superintendents, with varying building-level experiences, were conducted to describe professional pathways and how educational experiences shaped how they lead the district. An imbalance in building-level background of superintendents was recognized with most leaders having only secondary background as well as the inequity of gender in the leadership role. This researcher sought to get a better understanding of how experience and gender guided superintendents' decision making. Finally, the study sought to fill a gap in research that exists on how previous building-level experience and gender influence public school superintendents' journey to leadership and how duties of the position and responsibilities are prioritized. This imbalance in building-level experience and gender may pose a problem for school districts if the inequity creates an uneven focus on district responsibilities

All research is met with some limitations. Limitations of the current study were as follows:

1. The responses were based on a purposive sampling and may not reflect the general population of Missouri public school superintendents.

2. Participants may not have responded to the central questions truthfully or may have only shared experiences that would have contributed to themes they thought the researcher was trying to develop.
3. The size of district in which the participant had experience may have influenced the priorities of essential duties.
4. The sample size and selection may not accurately reflect general experiences of Missouri public school superintendents.
5. Responses were limited to self-reported data, which are sometimes difficult to verify.
6. Researcher bias was a limitation of this study.

There was a positive response to the online survey questionnaire, with 99 Missouri superintendents responding. The study sought to gain a better understanding of specifically which standards ranked as higher priorities than others, then link back to building-level experiences or gender. However, the results did not provide data that supported superintendents with elementary or secondary backgrounds tend to make decisions any differently. The same held true for gender.

As in any qualitative study, trustworthiness becomes important to establish so readers can have confidence in the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Since the information found in this study came from self-reported surveys and personal narratives, it was important to add the use of archival data to triangulate findings. Additionally, the researcher sent each interview superintendent the interview protocol (Appendix F) prior to meeting with participants so they were able to develop a sense of comfort in their answers and have the freedom to be candid. Another way to establish trustworthiness and

credibility is to involve the participants in verifying the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Interview participants were sent a copy of their transcript as well as a summary of findings and given the chance to provide feedback. Another factor for trustworthiness is the transferability of the study (Stahl & King, 2020). Because of the nature of qualitative research it can be difficult to replicate the study. While the study included district leaders from all nine RPDCs there is no assurance that the findings are a true representation of all Missouri superintendents. While themes reported from this study support information found in the literature review, if this research study were to be replicated, results may differ.

A final note to consider is whether information found in this study can be applied to other educational leaders, as well as administrators in states other than Missouri. As noted in previous chapters, the PSEL standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) were developed for all educational leaders in all states, but steer mainly toward building-level leadership. This study used the AASA standards because there have not been universal standards established for superintendents specifically. However, when one looks at the PSEL, the AASA standards, and standards developed by DESE there are many similarities. Therefore, one can anticipate that findings from this study can be applicable to leaders in all aspects of education in any state.

Standards. When looking at data from survey rankings, it was found that there was no difference in prioritization from participants with elementary, secondary, or both backgrounds. Overall the top three highest priority standards were Standard 1 - Leadership and District Culture, Standard 8 - Values and Ethics of Leadership, and Standard 3 - Communications and Community. This was consistent when looking at

background and experience. There was a slight difference in prioritization when looking at gender. Male respondents believed Standard 4 - Organizational Management was equally as important as Standard 3; however female respondents ranked Standard 2 - Policy and Governance as higher priority than Standard 3. This difference was not supported by themes that emerged from interviews or by district archival data.

When reviewing results from survey rankings, no difference was found regarding how standards from participants with elementary, secondary, or both backgrounds ranked lower priorities. Overall the lowest three priority standards were Standard 5 – Curriculum Planning and Development, Standard 6 – Instructional Management, and Standard 7 – Human Resources Management. This was consistent throughout all demographics with the exception of female respondents, who ranked Standard 4 – Organizational Management equally with Standard 7. The researcher did not find the difference to be supported by themes that emerged from the interviews or by district archival data. The low ranking of curriculum and planning was not anticipated. Additionally, the infrequent reference to curriculum and instruction was not expected.

Leadership styles. The theoretical framework for this study was situational leadership. A leader who leads through this model tends to look at relationships and readiness of the employee or group being affected (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). An effective leader uses a mix of different leadership traits to adapt to the needs of the organization, the preparedness of the employees, and the intensity of the crisis (Dinibutun, 2020; Henkel et al., 2019; Islam, Juraybi, & Alraythi, 2021). Considering whether the team is knowledgeable, confident, willing, or eager to complete the project is part of identifying the subordinates' readiness level (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018; Hersey

& Blanchard, 1996; Maisyaroh et al., 2019; Raza & Sikandar, 2018; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019; Walls, 2019).

While the survey did not ask a specific question about leadership style, the semi-structured interviews contained a question regarding how each superintendent thought others would describe them as a leader. Instead of giving specific leadership styles or theories of leadership, most of the participants gave characteristics of themselves that they thought would be noted by others. Characteristics of trustworthiness, involvement transparency collaborating, and others were used by the interviewees. However, 4 of the 10 participants cited specific leadership styles. Participant 2 said others would describe her as a transformational leader. Participants 4, 7, and 9 mentioned they would be described as servant leaders. However P6 mentioned traits of situational leadership. When asked how she might be described as a leader, P6 stated she is someone who adapts to situations. She shared about how each year is different and each situation is different. She expressed how one must respond to what the current situation looks like, then adapt accordingly. Although P6 did not say she was a situational leader, her description seemed to coincide with situational theories. Participant 6 went on to share how she made various decisions and who was included. She talked about preferring smaller focus groups that include building representatives who are knowledgeable about the situations as well as involving community members who have a background in the topic and can provide mature and rational input, adding to the success of the collaboration.

The researcher noted evidence of situational leadership traits in responses from the interview participants. Participant 7b spoke of how her district had not requested a

bond issue in nearly 15 years. But as the board looked at district facilities it became clear that a new gym was needed. Because she had developed trust within the community and had built relationships, she felt that they were ready to approve a bond. The ballot measure was placed before the voters and was approved with 65% of the votes the first time. While he did not use the term *situational leadership*, P8 also talked about the readiness and knowledge of groups who help make decisions. He emphasized decisions regarding curriculum, climate, and culture of buildings should be made by the educators. Educators are the most informed and ready to make student-related decisions. These are just a few examples of some situational leadership traits the interview participants revealed in their answers.

Building-level. The study sought to specifically look at building-level differences. While the data from surveys, interviews, and archival data did not generate support that leaders prioritized or led differently depending on their building-level background, there were pieces that acknowledged differences in building-level experience. The references to coaching and how the experience helped prepare many of the participants for leadership responsibilities were stated by participants who taught and or coached at the secondary level. Additionally, when participants referenced sponsoring clubs or extracurricular activities, the reference was made about working with secondary students. While none of the participants stated that secondary experiences or elementary experiences helped prepare them for district leadership, many references to responsibilities at the secondary level emerged.

In addition, two of the participants specifically referenced differences in staff at each building-level. Participant 7b talked about her approach to staff at different

building-levels when asking for input. She stated she believed there was a difference in staff response to surveys between elementary and high school teachers. Because of the difference she would rather call her high school administrator or faculty and ask them directly about their thoughts, but her approach might be different for elementary or middle school staff. Another comment about building-level differences that was made was in reference to what the staff are preparing students for. At the elementary level teachers are preparing students for socialization, rules, and routine, while at the high school level students are being prepared for life, entering the workforce, or moving on to postsecondary education. While there were not enough references to specific building-level experiences for a theme to emerge, the interpretation of information from the semi-structured interviews seemed to substantiate why there are more superintendents with secondary backgrounds than those with elementary backgrounds.

Collaboration and learning. One pattern that emerged from the interview data that was not anticipated was the variety of descriptions of collaboration and when or how it is used by each superintendent. Some participants used the term *collaboration* when seeking input from staff, community, and students, describing it more as listening to feedback and suggestions, not necessarily working with others for a common goal. Of the participants that referred to collaboration, three of them specified collaboration as necessary when it came to student learning. Participant 7a stated, “I like to collaborate and of course when it comes to curriculum and instruction, there’s got to be collaboration.” Participant 7b concurred by saying, “I think anytime we’re going to make a decision about student learning there’s a lot of conversations that go on. Conversations with our teachers, our curriculum director and the principals.” Participant 8 added that

when it comes to the details of curriculum or professional development he sought the feedback from his classroom teachers and others who could best talk about student needs and how to serve them.

Professional Implications

Superintendent turnover is difficult to track because there is limited data regarding the district leadership position throughout the United States. A recent article by Sawchuk (2022) estimated in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, 25% of the nation's superintendents left their position. This was almost a 10% increase from the previous 2 years (Sawchuk, 2022). While there was not a single factor blamed for such a mass exodus, it was described how the trend paralleled the turnover in teachers, paraprofessionals, and bus drivers (Sawchuk, 2022). The superintendent turnover problem exists in Missouri as well. Of the over 500 districts in Missouri, more than 100 started the 2022-2023 school year with a new superintendent (DESE, 2022).

With such a void to fill it is important for school boards and hiring committees to dig deep into each candidate's professional experiences, success record, and leadership style to find a good match for the district. By using themes revealed in this study, school boards should be looking at candidates who want to make a greater impact on the district and the community as a whole. The ideal candidate should also be interested in getting involved in the community and strive to have strong community relations. When interviewing candidates a school board should consider responses to see if the applicant has a student first mentality. Finally, according to responses from the study, the hiring committee should seek candidates who are well prepared in the area of district finance.

Interview participants added the following advice when asked what other qualities should be considered when school boards are looking to fill a superintendent position. Three of the 10 participants mentioned how school boards tend to look for qualities that were lacking in the previous leader. But the consensus of the interview group was that a school board must look at more than what is listed on the resumes or described in the candidates' letters of reference. Advice for school boards consisted of balancing out district goals, values, and needs with candidates' strengths and experiences; looking for someone who is flexible yet decisive; and seeing how the candidate interacts with others as all important factors that should be considered.

Another topic referenced in some interviews was that of superintendent preparation. When asked what experiences might have been lacking when first becoming a superintendent, most interview candidates listed budgeting or fiscal management as an area in which they could have been better prepared. Many of the participants referenced the task of learning about special programs and requirements for federal funding. One of the participants reflected on not having more experience with special education before entering the superintendent position. Participant 1 recalled wishing professors in the specialist classes had had more recent training and experience in funding formulas, but they had been away from the field for too long. Participant 1 showed gratitude for some mentors from the first few years as superintendent who were able to share some of the tricks of the trade.

Two of the interview participants expanded more on possible ways to improve on leadership preparation programs as well as continuing in personal professional development. Participant 9 specifically referenced women in leadership and being

involved in supporting female administrators who may not have other support systems. Participant 8 referenced the importance of realizing educators are preparing kindergarten students to be ready to work in a world that is 13 years away.

Additional professional implications for current and future superintendents that can be gleaned from this study include how respondents ranked the AASA standards. Overall the top three highest priority standards were Standard 1 - Leadership and District Culture, Standard 8 - Values and Ethics of Leadership, and Standard 3 - Communications and Community. If these areas are being reported as high priority, practicing and future district leaders need to be well prepared and ready to place their attention and efforts on these responsibilities. Preparation programs should also be aware of the importance of these areas and place greater weight on emphasizing these standards during leadership courses.

Finally, a common theme that was shared among the interview participants was that of job satisfaction. It was evident by the enthusiasm in each participant's voice and responses that they thoroughly enjoyed the superintendent job. Participant 1 said, "It's the best job around. I really do feel that way. I've had a lot of positions in school districts. My current role is absolutely the best job I've ever had in my life." Participant 2 stated loving the job and wanted to encourage other leaders to get out and see the people who are being impacted. Participant 5 stated it was the best job in the district. Finally, P8 said, "For me it's been the most rewarding and exhilarating position that I've ever had in education. I don't really see myself doing anything else."

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the varying building-level experiences of public school district leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role. While there is little research regarding building-level experiences and possible ties to decision making as an administrator, there remains room for additional studies to better understand this relationship. Furthermore, while there has been a multitude of studies regarding gender in superintendency (Bernal et al., 2017; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2021; McCauley, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019), future research could expand by investigating how and whether prioritizing and decision making is related to gender.

This study used a qualitative narrative approach to researching superintendent pathways. While self-reporting survey responses were used, future studies could include a mixed-methods approach that would allow the researcher to compare findings of the superintendents' rankings with those of his or her subordinates and various stakeholders. By expanding the scope of participants it would allow researchers to look at different perspectives of how a district administrator makes decisions and which areas of district responsibilities are prioritized.

Additionally, this study asked open-ended questions regarding which experiences helped prepare the participants for their role as a district leader and which experiences did they feel were lacking. The researcher learned from the responses that some of the participants pulled from experiences outside of the educational realm. Future research could delve into this further or simply design questions in which the participants focus on their educational professional experiences only.

Finally, this study was delimited to include superintendents with at least 3 years of experience in the district leadership role. Although one participant only had 2 years' experience, the remaining nine interview participants had anywhere from 3 to more than 10 years of experience. Because it had been over 5 years since assuming the superintendent role, some of the memories about how prepared they were may not have been accurate. Additionally, one could delimit the study to novice superintendents within their first 3 years of district leadership to compare narratives.

Conclusions

This qualitative narrative study sought to explore the varying building-level experiences of public school district leaders in their path toward superintendency, and what responsibilities were prioritized once in that role. Situational leadership was used as a framework for understanding leadership styles in regard to decision making. Because situational leadership styles vary depending on specific conditions and relationships, it is important to look at whether gender or previous building-level experience may affect the leaders' response. Data suggest there is an imbalance in both building-level experience and gender of district leaders. Additionally there is a gap in research regarding differences in prior educational experience of superintendents and their leadership priorities. The researcher sought to attempt to fill a portion of this gap.

While situational leadership was used as the framework for this study, there was no evidence that supported that building-level background or gender supported the use of this leadership style over others. However, there were some references to the use of situational leadership characteristics when making decisions. These comments supported information found in the literature review. An effective leader uses a mix of different

leadership traits to adapt to the needs of the organization, the preparedness of the employees, and the intensity of the crisis (Dinibutun, 2020; Henkel et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2021).

Throughout the review process four common themes surfaced. These themes were also compared to findings in the researcher's literature review regarding superintendent standards. Themes that emerged were (a) desire to make a greater impact, (b) the importance of being visible and involved, (c) decisions are made with a student first mentality, and (d) knowledge of fiscal management is a priority.

Additionally, survey results from the 99 responses showed that participants viewed AASA Standard 1 - Leadership and District Culture, Standard 8 - Values and Ethics of Leadership, and Standard 3 - Communications and Community as of highest priority. District archival data supported these priorities from the 10 interview participants. Survey rankings also revealed Standard 5 – Curriculum Planning and Development, Standard 6 – Instructional Management, and Standard 7 – Human Resources Management as lower priority from those who participated. District archival data could neither support nor contradict this finding.

Educational stakeholders could review these findings regarding superintendents' pathway to the leadership position and how responsibilities are prioritized. Current superintendents could glean from the four themes found in this study: (a) striving to make a greater impact, (b) being involved in the community, (c) having a student first mentality, and (d) being fiscally responsible, and using the discovery as a tool to reflect on professional practices. Information from this study can be added to the body of literature so future superintendents and administrator preparation programs are able to

make more informed decisions based on the updated literature. Finally, local school boards could use these findings as they search for candidates to fill the superintendent positions.

While information from this study could be useful to districts as noted above, results only partially fulfilled the purpose of the study regarding what responsibilities were prioritized once in the superintendent's role. The results could still demonstrate usefulness to educators since strong ties were made to important themes superintendents should be aware of. As educators, it is important that all teachers and leaders should remain focused on the third theme found in the study, having a student first mindset.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: RRB Approval

September 9, 2022

Re: Pathway to Superintendency Described by Missouri Superintendents

Dear Ms. Knox

On September 9, 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,

Colleen Shuler

Colleen Shuler, Ed.D.
Chair, Research Review Board
Assistant Professor of Education

Appendix B: Email Communication

Greetings,

I am a doctoral student completing my final requirements for the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Southwest Baptist University. I am currently working on my dissertation entitled "*Pathways to Superintendency*." The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the previous building-level experiences of Missouri public school superintendents in their path toward superintendency, and how they prioritized district level responsibilities once they were in the leadership role.

At this time, my research proposal is complete, and I have received RRB approval from Southwest Baptist University. I have been in education for 22 years and have taken precautions to avoid any potential biases. I am seeking participants to answer a brief questionnaire regarding how you prioritize responsibilities of public school superintendents, as well as to specify demographics regarding your building-level career path, gender, district size, and tenure as a superintendent. Participants can then volunteer to be part of a 30-minute follow-up interview to be completed virtually at a later time. If chosen for the interview, you will be one of 10 participants who represent each of the nine RPDCs (two from the Southwest region).

If you are willing to be part of this study, please fill out the following [Informed Consent Link](#). The link will then direct you to a Google Form for the questionnaire. You will be given an option at the end of the questionnaire to volunteer to continue with the study by participating in a virtual interview.

If you have any questions or concerns and would like to further discuss this study, I would be happy to do so. Thank you in advance for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Cheryl P. Knox
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University
Cell Phone: (417) 225-8032
Email: cherylknox1970@gmail.com

Appendix C: Consent Form

The advisor for this dissertation project is Dr. Tammy Condren, Associate Professor of Education at Southwest Baptist University. This study has been approved by the Research Review Board of Southwest Baptist University.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the previous building-level experiences of Missouri public school superintendents in their path toward superintendency, and how they prioritized district-level responsibilities once they were in the leadership role.

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 with a copy of both for your review. All files containing personal identifiers will be kept locked away by the researchers for five years; at that point all information will be destroyed.

If you are chosen for an interview it will be conducted via Zoom or Google Meet and recorded. Upon completion, interviews will be transcribed electronically. You will be provided with 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 cherylknox1970@gmail.com or by phone at 417.225.8032. Dr. Tammy Condren can be reached at tcondren@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. You will then be directed to a brief questionnaire through Google Forms.

Sincerely,

Cheryl P. Knox
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University

Appendix D: Initial Questionnaire

Demographic Information

1. Building-Level Experience:
 - a. Years of Leadership experience at the following levels
 - i. Elementary (*For the purpose of this study, a building which houses any combination of grades Kindergarten through sixth.*)
1 – 5 _____ 6-10 _____ 10+ _____
 - ii. Secondary (*For the purpose of this study, a building which houses any grades not lower than seventh and not to exceed grade twelve.*)
1 – 5 _____ 6-10 _____ 10+ _____
 - b. Years of teaching experience at the following levels
 - i. Elementary (*For the purpose of this study, a building which houses any combination of grades Kindergarten through sixth.*)
1 – 5 _____ 6-10 _____ 10+ _____
 - ii. Secondary (*For the purpose of this study, a building which houses any grades not lower than seventh and not to exceed grade twelve.*)
1 – 5 _____ 6-10 _____ 10+ _____
2. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Prefer not to answer
3. Approximate enrollment in the current district you lead:
 - a. _____ less than 500
 - b. _____ 501 – 1000
 - c. _____ 1001 – 2000
 - d. _____ 2001 +
4. Tenure as a superintendent:
 - a. _____ 1-5 years
 - b. _____ 6-10 years
 - c. _____ 10+ years
5. RPDC in which your district resides
 - a. _____ Southeast – Cape Girardeau
 - b. _____ Heart of Missouri
 - c. _____ Kansas City
 - d. _____ Northeast – Kirksville
 - e. _____ Northwest – Maryville
 - f. _____ South Central – Rolla
 - g. _____ Southwest – Springfield
 - h. _____ St. Louis
 - i. _____ Central – Warrensburg

Prioritization of Superintendent Standards

Please prioritize the AASA Superintendent Standards listed below by what you consider to be the order of importance. Use a ranking of 1 – 8, with 1 being the highest importance and 8 being the lowest.

_____ Standard 1) Leadership and district culture

_____ Standard 2) Policy and governance

_____ Standard 3) Communications and community relations

_____ Standard 4) Organizational management

_____ Standard 5) Curriculum planning and development

_____ Standard 6) Instructional management

_____ Standard 7) Human resources management

_____ Standard 8) Values and ethics of leadership

Participation in an Interview

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire. If you would like to be considered for a 30-45 minute follow-up interview through Google Meet or Zoom please indicate here.

Appendix E: Interview Email

Email

(Participant name)

I would like to thank you for being willing to participate in the interview process on your experiences as a public-school superintendent. Our interview will last approximately 30 - 45 minutes, during which I will be asking you a variety of questions in hopes of gaining additional insight. Below you will find a scheduling link to schedule your interview time and platform.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the previous building-level experiences of Missouri public school superintendents in their path toward superintendency, and how they prioritized district-level responsibilities once they were in the leadership role.

I would like your permission to record this interview. Please note, no names or titles will be used in the report and all individuals will be referred to as participants. Please indicate on the scheduling link whether you give permission for the interview to be recorded.

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.

Feel free to ask questions at any time, I would be more than happy to answer anything that comes up during the interview.

Sincerely,

Cheryl P. Knox
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

1. What led to your desire to be a superintendent?
2. How would people describe you as a leader?
3. What does our community expect of you as a leader?
 - a. Is that different from your prior district? (Follow up if this is not first district assignment)
4. What experiences prepared you the most for superintendency?
 - a. In hindsight, were there any other experiences that would have been helpful?
5. What do you consider when making district decisions?
 - a. Are there specific situations that lend themselves to collaboration more than others?
6. If you were a school board consultant, what would you advise boards to look for in a superintendent candidate?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the superintendency?