

Women's Satisfaction in the Superintendency: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of female superintendents as they relate to job satisfaction and retention. State department of education websites were consulted to obtain the number of women superintendents by state for 2015. From the list, 3,364 women superintendents were identified. The women represent 25% of U.S. superintendents. Women superintendents of five states with percentages of women superintendents below the national average were selected for inclusion in the study.

An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was used that included a survey sent to all 215 PK-12 women public school superintendents in South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa. Based on the survey findings, the women superintendents reported high levels of job satisfaction. Based on the survey results, 20 women superintendents, who reported high levels of job satisfaction, were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews.

Both the quantitative and qualitative results indicated high levels of satisfaction by the women. Women consistently described the position as being rewarding. Women identified aspects of the position that contributed to their satisfaction: being strategic and creating a vision; instructional leadership; building relationships; developing others; and the variety of tasks.

Keywords: women as superintendents, female superintendent satisfaction, educational leadership, women, superintendency

Education is a female-dominated field. According to the 2011-2012 Schools and Staffing Survey, more than 75% of all teachers are women (U.S. Department of Education, 2011-12b). Additionally, slightly more than half of all public school principals are women (U.S. Department of Education, 2011-12a). However, the role of the superintendent continues to be disproportionately held by men. According to the American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study, less than a quarter of superintendents are women (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

Previous research on women and the superintendency has largely focused on the challenges and barriers that women face. Little research has explored female superintendents' job satisfaction or why they have chosen to remain in this challenging role. The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of female superintendents as they relate to job satisfaction and retention. A mixed methods approach was used that included both qualitative and quantitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A survey was designed to elicit women superintendents' responses to their satisfaction in their roles. The survey results were further illuminated by follow-up interviews with 20 of the superintendents. The study was focused solely on the issue of satisfaction. This study expands on previous research pertaining to women and the superintendency, as well as adding new voices to the literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addressed a number of different research questions.

Quantitative:

- To what extent are female superintendents satisfied with their jobs?
- In what areas do female superintendents find high levels of satisfaction in their jobs?
- In what areas do female superintendents identify low levels of job satisfaction?

Qualitative:

- How do female superintendents describe their level of job satisfaction?
- How do female superintendents with high levels of job satisfaction describe their decisions to stay?
- How do female superintendents deal with the stresses and challenges of the position?

Mixed Methods:

- Do the factors that female superintendents identify as being important to them relate to their overall level of job satisfaction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has examined the barriers that women experience when seeking the position as superintendent (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; FeKula & Roberts, 2005; Montz & Wanat, 2008; Quilantan & Ochoa, 2004 Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004) and the challenges that face women once they obtain the position (Garn & Brown, 2008; Reed & Patterson, 2007; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Polka, Litchka & Davis, 2008; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). Women who aspire to the superintendency are often confronted with challenges from the start. Research has found that women often lack the social networks that help many men find these positions (Garn & Brown, 2008; Montz & Wanat, 2008; Sharp, Malone, Montz, Mills, Paankake, & Whaley, 2014; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009; Walter & Supley, 2004) In part because there are fewer women in the field, women who aspire to the superintendency lack role models and mentors as they pursue these positions (Garn & Brown, 2008; Munoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley, 2014). Research has also found that women many times follow different career paths than men, often entering administrative positions later in their careers (Fekula & Roberts, 2005; Garn & Brown, 2008; Munoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley, 2014).

For those women who do obtain a superintendent's position, they continue to face a number of challenges. Research shows that women are more likely to accept positions in smaller districts and those that have specific kinds of challenges (Montz & Wanat, 2008). These challenges can include financial concerns or troubled boards. Women also are confronted with the stress inherent in the role. Research has documented that increased federal mandates and a push to do more with less has increased the pressure in an already stressful role (Hawk & Martin, 2011; Kolowski, McCord, Petersen, Young & Ellerson, 2011; Reed & Patterson, 2007). Finally, many women report that they are confronted with gender bias and gender stereotypes from both board members and the larger community (Garn & Brown, 2008; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009)

The literature on female superintendents and their satisfaction in their roles is sparse and many are not recent. The literature on women in the superintendency includes a number of studies of the demographics of women in the superintendency and the challenges and barriers they experience. Few studies cite the topic of satisfaction in the role, these studies are not recent. For instance, Wesson and Grady (1994) report a study of urban female superintendents and their satisfaction, personal benefits of the job, self-fulfillment, and

personal strengths. Fusarelli, Cooper, Bruce and Carella (2003) report that women superintendents found career satisfaction in the nation's largest schools.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of female superintendents as they relate to job satisfaction and retention. An explanatory sequential mixed method study design was used to address the purpose of the study.

EXPLANATORY SEQUENTIAL DESIGN

In an explanatory sequential design, there are two distinct phases, an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Since we were concerned with interviewing women who thrive in the position, the initial quantitative results provided a pool from which a purposeful sample of superintendents to be selected.

Quantitative Survey

The first step in determining participants was to examine 2015 national data. The fifty State Departments of Education were contacted in order to obtain a list of all current superintendents. Superintendents of all public districts were included; charter schools were not included. A list of the 13,474 superintendents was created. From the list, the 3,364 female superintendents were identified. In Table 1, the total number of superintendents and the number and percentage of female superintendents by state, based on 2015 data, are presented. At that time, 25% of the superintendents in the United States were women.

When selecting states to include in the study, states with percentages of women superintendents that were less than the national average were considered. Five states were selected for the study (Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, and South Dakota). These states had fewer female superintendents, based on percentages, than the national average (25%). Also, these states were within a geographic region that would allow the researcher to conduct in-depth, in person interviews during the second qualitative phase. Although there are a variety of school district configurations in the US, the superintendents chosen for inclusion in the study led districts that were PK-12 or K-12.

Although there were 235 women superintendents at the time the 2015 national data was examined, at the time of the survey distribution, only 215 women remained in the role of superintendent in the identified five states. The 215 female superintendents in Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, and South Dakota were sent a survey via the internet. The survey was developed based on Fowler's (2014) guidelines. The data collection platform Qualtrics was used for distribution, data collection, and analysis of results. An email to the

female superintendents provided a link to the survey. Of the 215 superintendents contacted, 132 responded, and 131 (61%) completed the survey.

The survey was based on the research literature concerning female superintendents (Polka, Litchka, & Davis, 2008; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005; Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004) and the specific topics discussed by Helgesen and Johnson's (2010) in *The Female Vision*. The survey had three sections. The first section solicited demographic information from the superintendents. The second section included questions related to job satisfaction. The third section consisted of statements related to general satisfaction and feelings about the role of the superintendent.

Once surveys were completed, data was analyzed using the reports feature of Qualtrics. Descriptive statistics, based on the survey responses, were collected. Mean, median, and standard deviations were calculated. The overall level of job satisfaction for the respondents as well as a frequency analysis of individual items was collected.

Table 1: *Female Superintendents by State*

State	Female Superintendents	Total Superintendents	Percentage of Female Superintendents
Connecticut	63	165	38%
Maryland	9	24	38%
Rhode Island	13	34	38%
Delaware	7	19	37%
New Hampshire	36	97	37%
West Virginia	21	57	37%
California	374	1028	36%
Arizona	76	217	35%
Vermont	21	60	35%
New York	243	719	34%
Hawaii	5	15	33%
New Jersey	193	592	33%
Georgia	53	180	29%
South Carolina	25	86	29%
Massachusetts	115	408	28%
Pennsylvania	138	500	28%
Washington	84	297	28%
Florida	18	67	27%
Tennessee	40	146	27%
Virginia	35	131	27%
New Mexico	23	89	26%
Wisconsin	109	424	26%
Illinois	212	856	25%
Michigan	151	597	25%
Mississippi	38	155	25%
Alabama	32	135	24%
Alaska	13	54	24%
Colorado	42	178	24%
Maine	56	242	23%
Minnesota	77	328	23%

State	Female Superintendents	Total Superintendents	Percentage of Female Superintendents
North Carolina	26	115	23%
Oregon	45	197	23%
Texas	278	1198	23%
Indiana	64	297	22%
Louisiana	15	69	22%
Arkansas	51	257	20%
Idaho	23	115	20%
Kentucky	34	173	20%
Montana	32	157	20%
Oklahoma	96	518	19%
Missouri	96	532	18%
North Dakota	30	176	17%
South Dakota	25	150	17%
Wyoming	8	48	17%
Ohio	99	613	16%
Kansas	44	293	15%
Iowa	44	363	12%
Nevada	2	17	12%
Nebraska	26	245	11%
Utah	4	41	10%
National Totals	3364	13474	25%

Note. Data obtained from each state's department of education website. Websites were consulted in July 2015. All information was current at that time.

Survey Results

Surveys were emailed to 215 female superintendents. One hundred and thirty-one superintendents completed the survey. Of the respondents, the average tenure as a superintendent was seven years, with a range of one to 24 years. The average number of years in their current district was five years. Sixty-three superintendents (48%) led districts with fewer than 500 students. Sixty-two (47%) led districts with 501-5000 students. Six superintendents (4%) led districts of 5001 or more students. Fifty-two superintendents

(40%) held a doctoral degree. Prior to becoming superintendent, 47 (36%) held a district level position, 71 (54%) were principals, the remaining 13 (10%) held a variety of other roles.

Table 2: *Satisfaction (n=131)*

Questions	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
How satisfied are you with...		
Your current position (overall)?	126 (97%)	4 (3%)
Your level of autonomy?	127 (97%)	4 (3%)
Your ability to make a difference?	127 (97%)	4 (3%)
Your ability to grow professionally?	124 (95%)	7 (5%)
The feedback you receive from your board?	109 (83%)	22 (17%)
The relationships you have with others in your district?	127 (97%)	4 (3%)
Your salary?	101 (77%)	30 (23%)
Your benefits package?	103 (79%)	28 (21%)

Superintendents responded to questions about their job satisfaction. Eight questions were posed. A Likert format for responses with a four-category continuum ranging from Very Satisfied (4), Satisfied (3), Dissatisfied (2), to Very Dissatisfied (1) was used. The first question was about overall satisfaction in the position. The remaining seven questions were about satisfaction in particular aspects of the job. The mean scores on all of the areas was 3.0 or above, indicating that the average score for each was at the satisfied level or above. The area with the highest reported level of satisfaction (3.6) was satisfaction with relationships they have with others in their districts. The frequency of responses to the questions about satisfaction are presented as Table 2.

The third section of the survey consisted of statements derived from literature on the challenges of the superintendency related to general satisfaction and feelings about the job. Superintendents were asked to respond to these statements using a four-category Likert scale consisting of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The four-point scale was selected because it forces participants to select either an indicator of satisfaction or dissatisfaction as opposed to offering a neutral option. The responses to these statements are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Responses to Statements About the Superintendency (n=131)*

Prompt	Agree	Disagree
Being a superintendent is challenging	131 (100%)	-
Being a superintendent impacts my personal and professional relationships	131 (100%)	-
My work is meaningful	130 (99%)	1 (1%)
I make a difference	130 (99%)	1 (1%)
I am proud to be the superintendent of my district	130 (99%)	1 (1%)
I positively impact people in my school community	128 (98%)	3 (2%)
Being a superintendent is rewarding	126 (97%)	4 (3%)
I am happy in my current job	125 (95%)	6 (5%)
I have open lines of communication with my board	124 (95%)	7 (5%)
I feel supported in the decisions I make	123 (94%)	8 (6%)
I feel supported in my professional growth	119 (91%)	12 (8%)
I feel appreciated in my current position	117 (89%)	14 (11%)

Qualitative Procedure

The second phase of the study consisted of one-on-one interviews with superintendents to identify the facets of the superintendency that led to high levels of satisfaction and influenced their decisions to remain in the role of superintendent. A participant selection variant of the explanatory sequential model was selected to identify interview participants. Individuals were selected based on two criteria drawn from the survey responses. First, only individuals with high levels of job satisfaction, as measured by the initial survey, were considered for inclusion in the interviews. The composite score from the satisfaction scale had a range of lowest (8) to highest (32). Individuals who had a composite score of very satisfied (25 or above) on the satisfaction scale were considered. Second, individuals who indicated a willingness to participate in an interview as part of their survey responses were considered for inclusion in the interviews. Sixty-six individuals met the criteria for inclusion in the interview process. Twenty superintendents were selected based on geographic proximity to each other in the five states.

Interviews took place during the spring of 2016. Twenty interviews were conducted, 19 were face-to-face and one was via telephone. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted in the office of the superintendent being interviewed. Six interviews were conducted at a conference. The interview locations were based upon the preferences of the participants.

All interviews were digitally recorded with permission of the participants. Recordings were then transcribed and participants were provided with the opportunity to review their transcripts.

An interview guide was developed for the study. Interview questions were open-ended. A narrative approach to the interview was used. “The purpose of the interview in qualitative inquiry is to create a conversation that invites the telling of narrative accounts that will inform the research question” (Josselson, 2013, p.4). The mixed methods design included qualitative and quantitative components that allowed triangulation of results. (Patton, 2001).

Interview (Qualitative) Data

The 20 superintendents interviewed were satisfied or very satisfied with their work. They consistently used the word “rewarding” to describe their work. Their comments were all similar to these

“It’s very, very rewarding. I know that even in good times and bad times, I am making a difference in communities.”

“Well, overall I would describe it as being very satisfying, very rewarding. I’ve been very lucky in that I’ve had a career that I could really enjoy.”

One superintendent described the experience as,

It’s a fun job. It is hard; but, it’s great fun, I worry that people don’t go or try for this position because they’ve heard too much negative; or, they worry they won’t be successful. And, the work is, at times, very intense. In every decision you make, you know that it impacts teachers and kids; but, it’s not as hard and as difficult as people think it is. It’s just not. It’s a lot more fun than people think it is.

The women shared a love of what they do. Their comments included, “I just love the gig, I love the people and the kids. It doesn’t feel like a job most days.” One superintendent acknowledged the stress and challenge but said, “It’s very grueling. It is very hard. It’s very high stress and you can never leave it. But it is worth it, if you truly love it.” Two superintendents nearing retirement reflected on the love they have for what they do. One said, “It’s going to be hard for me to walk away from this district; but, here’s the way I figure, if I was 70, it’d still be hard to walk away from this district.” Another said,

I love this job. I mean the hardest part is going to be walking away....we’ve just had so many wonderful things; and, it is going to be hard whenever I walk away. But, I love it. I do love this job, even on the bad days. I love this job.

They Enjoy...

The superintendents described specific aspects of the position that they enjoyed. Five themes emerged within this topic: being strategic and creating a vision; instructional leadership; building relationships; developing others; and the variety of tasks.

Figure 1 displays the themes as they relate to the women superintendents' job satisfaction.

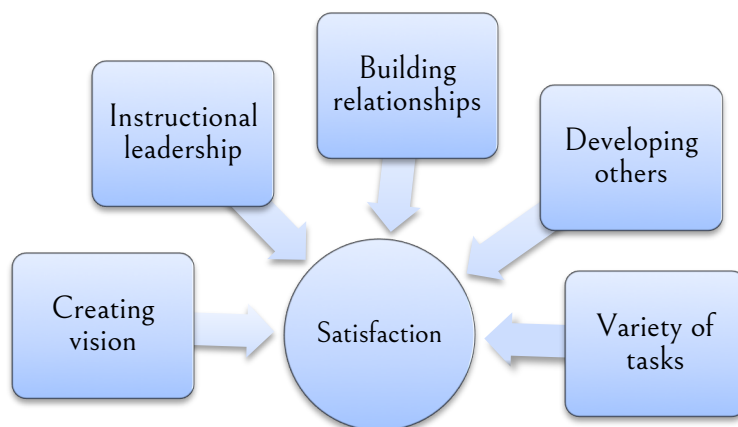


Figure 1. Themes within the topic of job satisfaction

Being strategic and creating a vision

The superintendents noted their satisfaction in being able to make their vision a reality in the districts where they worked. One superintendent said,

I really like that I can take ideas that I've always had and put them into action. I have to convince my board; but, I found them to be a lot easier to convince than when I was a teacher and had to convince a principal.

A superintendent who had a background in technology instruction said, "I've always been big on technology; so, it's nice being able to budget for that, and knowing your commitments and what you're committed to, and being able to fund it."

Two superintendents discussed creating a vision for their districts. One said, "I like being the person that can see the big picture and share that. The strategic planning is huge, and just setting the direction for the district, and really communicating with our constituents and promoting that." Another individual shared a similar sentiment, "I enjoy planning out things that we want to accomplish. I was just in the strength finders thing, and futuristic is one of my strengths. So, I really enjoy that."

Instructional leadership

Another aspect of the job that the superintendents enjoyed was being an instructional leader. Six of the superintendents came from curriculum backgrounds and said that was something they could bring to the position. One superintendent discussed being hired as a superintendent in her current district,

I think why they hired me is they wanted somebody with a curriculum background. I think there's a wave of change coming across [the state]. I think they always wanted the big financial person and that was your stereotypical male who taught business. I think schools now are looking more for a curriculum person and that's what they wanted.

One superintendent reported looking for a smaller district where she could be involved in curriculum and instruction. "It's an environment that I wanted, so I could be close to instruction. My curriculum background really probably shines through here. I wanted to be part of the professional growth of teachers."

Another superintendent said, "I've enjoyed the superintendency more than I thought I would. I'm not a managerial person; but we're not managers. Superintendents are called upon these days to be instructional leaders, more than they ever were."

One individual said, "The piece I'm really excited about is next year getting to be more of an instructional leader, because that's where you really effect change. It is when you can improve student achievement."

Building relationships

The superintendents discussed the need to communicate and build relationships as a superintendent. Some superintendents focused on formal structures that they put into place in order to assist in developing these relationships. One individual described working with the district's advisory group,

I love working with our School Improvement Advisory Committee. We meet periodically throughout the year. We've got students, and staff, and faculty, and community all together. That night is more structured, we have a plan versus a forum. Just getting people to communicate, helping them feel ownership in what we do, because you can just feel that in the room when people start to melt a little bit.

One superintendent described building relationships and communicating with community members while working on a bond issue, "I loved the tax levy, the PR part of

running a tax levy, the coming up with how to advertise, and doing the town hall meetings and getting information out; that part was super fun for me.”

One individual commented on the importance of building relationships with all of the different groups you work with as superintendent, “The relationship with your board of education is of utmost importance, and then I still try to work hard with the teachers. The relationship with your administrators is very, very important too.”

One superintendent noted how working in a small district assisted in creating relationships,

Being in a small district, I’m able to go through the classrooms. I’m able to talk to the kids. I’m able to see the teachers on a daily basis. Just to have those relationships with people that I think you probably miss out on in a larger district.

The superintendents recognized the importance of being a skilled communicator. They saw value in building relationships with their constituents and found that was a part of the job they enjoyed.

Developing others

The superintendents described the importance of developing others as one of the roles they enjoyed the most. One superintendent said, “In my position, it’s more about developing the leadership and the teachers and how that trickles down to the kids.”

Another superintendent described her approach for developing the team of administrators she works with.

I said to each one of them, “So where do you want to be in three years and five years from now?” And some of them said, “You know what? I love being a principal. And I hope I’m still here and I hope I’m in this building.” And hurray, that’s awesome. Some said they didn’t know. My offer to them was, “When you know what you want and what you need, tell me. I’m more than happy to help.”

One superintendent described working with a principal who shared his aspiration to the superintendency.

We mapped out a plan. And he’s done some board meetings. He’s been in charge when I’ve been gone. There have been a lot of things over the last three years that when I start doing something I go, “Oh, he probably needs to be in on this.” He’s done fantastic. In fact, he is coming over as assistant superintendent starting in June.

One superintendent noted the most important aspect of developing others is

Developing leadership, that applies to developing the leadership with the board members that serve, and the building administrators, or all the directors and administrators. I mean buildings and grounds, food services, everybody. Also, making sure that you're growing the capacity to develop leaders in all positions. So what's the building principal doing to nurture and grow teacher-leaders? What's the bus driver doing? What's the Director of Transportation doing to develop leaders on his team? I don't develop all those leaders; but, I need to make sure I'm developing the leader to develop the leaders.

Another superintendent spoke about developing others in the context of working with the school board. She discussed this as being an important role as well as one that she found satisfying.

I think my role is to help them learn their role. Most people don't [understand the role of school board member]. They have no prior experience. They don't go to school to be a school board member. It's the only elected position in [the state] that's unpaid. How do you do that? Work with the board president. Having a good board president is key. I've had so many different board presidents; and, they've all had different strengths and they're all important.

Variety of tasks

Sharp and Walter (2004) describe the superintendent as a “generalist” who is concerned with a variety of tasks within the district. The superintendents who were interviewed spoke to this and described this as being an attractive component of the job.

One superintendent said, “I love that it's never the same thing two days in a row or even two hours in a row. I love the novelty and variety.” Another superintendent shared similar thoughts about the variety of tasks,

Every day's different. You get up and you go to work and you're like, “I wonder what's going to happen today?” There's never been two days that are the same. So it's totally a learn-as-you-go position. You also just have to tell yourself that if you don't know the answer to something, you'll be able to find it.

One individual described enjoyment in the complex nature of being a superintendent.

I truly love problem-solving. So here's a challenge, how are we going to get through it? As much as I enjoyed it and loved it, going back to doing curriculum all the time would not be enough. This position has helped me see a bigger picture and how all the different pieces work together.

The superintendents found satisfaction in many facets of the position. They were attracted to the superintendency because they had a desire to work at the system level and enjoyed creating a vision for that system. The superintendents enjoyed developing relationships and developing others. Finally, they enjoyed being a generalist and the variety of different tasks that made up their days.

Dissatisfaction

When talking to the superintendents about the parts of the job they were less satisfied with, three themes emerged: finances, facilities, and dealing with difficult people and situations. The superintendents noted that these issues took time away from their number one priority, the students. One superintendent noted that the other things really can constitute a significant portion of the job. “Honestly, I am amazed at how much of the superintendent’s job is not about teaching and learning.” Figure 2 displays how these themes related to dissatisfaction.

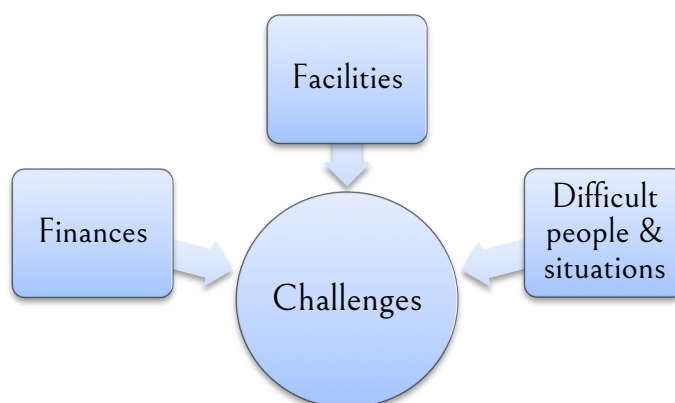


Figure 2. Themes of dissatisfaction in the superintendency

School Finance

Eight of the superintendents talked about school finance. Their dissatisfaction did not stem from budgeting or running a district’s finances, instead the superintendents expressed frustration with the lack of state funding and the push to do more with less. This theme also encompassed the political aspect of the position and working with local and state government. When asked what parts of the job were less satisfying another superintendent responded,

The finance side of things; I mean, I can do it. But, for years, you heard the budget this and the budget that. Well, it takes a month to do, and it’s done. Then all you have to do is watch the bottom line and make sure you’re not overspending. But,

we've lost a lot of state aid, over the years, and valuation has gone up. So we're putting more pressure on local people, and so it's answering to that. Most of the people understand. Our valuation has gone up. So, whenever valuation goes up, state aid goes down. And, that's just the way it is.

Another superintendent talked about how the cut in state aid has impacted her district,

We are significantly underfunded as a state and so it's tough. I had a strong staffing proposal before my board, and they accepted it. The next day the state contacted me and said they made an error and we were losing nearly two million in funding. I had to go back to the board and explain that we could no longer afford to do that.

The superintendent described the staff proposal that addressed documented needs of students in the district, providing additional support to help the students succeed. Unfortunately, due to funding they will have to find alternate ways to meet those needs with the resources they already have.

One superintendent raised an issue related to school funding, the regulation aspect, which caused her frustration,

The finance is something you have to do; but I don't love it. I don't like the regulations associated with finance; you're answering to the federal government, the state government, the local board; making that all compatible, and making sure you're in compliance, and some of the rules [are challenging]. For instance, I wanted to do some training in June, for Pathways to Reading, for next school year. I wouldn't pay for it until July, but the training would occur in June. I can't pay for it out of next year's Title 1 funds. You can't do things like that. Instead we'll have five days of subs, for 10 teachers. How is that good for student achievement?

One individual was frustrated because of the time spent focused on politics instead of on students,

When I have to get further away from the focus of what we're here for, that's where it gets to be a little [difficult]. When you're dealing with all the legislative stuff, or the politics between the city sometimes, that's the part where you go, "Yuck," but it's part of the job and you just have to do it.

For the superintendents, their frustration with finance stemmed from the impact it had on students and communities. With cuts in state aid and increased regulation, the superintendents indicated that the focus was not on what was best for kids.

Facilities

For other superintendents, facilities were the area they found the least satisfaction. A superintendent said,

I hate dealing with facilities. I'm just not interested in people telling me that their phone doesn't work, or it's too cold in their room, or that the roof is leaking. I just, I don't care, and I have to.

Another superintendent echoed frustration with facilities,

I guess I will tell you that building and grounds is the area that I like the least, because I don't have any experience with putting on a roof. We pour concrete. I look at drains. We put in new bleachers. It's stuff I don't know anything about. So, I have to spend a lot of time learning about these things. I had to buy a bus. So, what's the best bus to buy? Who do you buy it from? Is it a diesel? Is it a gas? Those types of things.

Another superintendent mentioned roofs,

And then roofs. Somewhere there's always going to be a leak. When you have these massive roofs, you're just going to have problems with them. My first year here, we replaced two substantially-sized buildings, their roofs. Just monitoring that has been a big issue. We're doing another one this summer.

Dealing with difficult people and situations

The final theme was dealing with difficult people and situations. The theme encompassed a variety of circumstances that superintendents reported. One talked about dealing with difficult parents,

I think what frustrates me sometimes, it has to do mostly with sports or something like that and parents want to come in and fire this coach and they want to fire that coach. That just really frustrates me. They don't want to talk about test scores that have continually gone up for five years. They don't want to talk about programs that we're now offering that we didn't offer before. They don't want to talk about what we're trying to do facility-wise. They want to talk about who should be the basketball coach.

Another individual talked about dealing with parents and community members,

There's times you deal with individuals and parents and adults that just aren't rational. It's time consuming. It's taxing. Sometimes there's resolution and sometimes there's not.

One superintendent had a slightly different perspective on these situations. For her, they were still opportunities to make a difference, even though they were difficult situations at the time,

I can't think of anything that I don't like about my job really. But sometimes, when you have to step in and do some of those tough things—we've had some crisis situations, every district does. Those probably, I wish I dealt with those a little bit better. I can't say that I hate them, but they get pretty emotional. But, it is part of what we do. I can't say that I hate that part because again, it's an opportunity for impact.

The superintendents indicated high levels of overall job satisfaction; however, there were facets of the job which some superintendents found frustrating and unsatisfying. A common thread in these components is that they took the focus off of students and student achievement. However, facilities, finances, and dealing with difficult situations are all part of what a superintendent deals with each day.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of female superintendents as they relate to job satisfaction and retention. To achieve the purpose of the study the following research questions were developed.

Quantitative

To what extent are female superintendents satisfied with their jobs?

Previous research has found that superintendents report high levels of satisfaction in their job (Kolalski, et al., 2011; Sharp, Malone, Walter, Supley, 2004; Sampson & Davenport, 2010). The data from this study supports our findings. The female superintendents surveyed consistently indicated high levels of job satisfaction, with 126 (96%) superintendents reporting that they were either satisfied or highly satisfied with their job.

In what areas do female superintendents find high levels of satisfaction in their jobs?

The superintendents who responded to the survey indicated satisfaction with all of the aspects of the job that were addressed. The mean score for all areas was at least 3.0 on a 4-point scale with: 1 as very dissatisfied, 2 as dissatisfied, 3 as satisfied, and 4 as very satisfied. The following four questions demonstrated the highest level of satisfaction with a mean score of 3.47 or above.

- How satisfied are you with the relationships you have with others in your district? 3.57
- How satisfied are you with your level of autonomy? 3.53
- How satisfied are you with your ability to make a difference? 3.49
- How satisfied are you with your ability to grow professionally? 3.47

In what areas do female superintendents identify low levels of job satisfaction?

All responses to the survey questions had a mean satisfaction score of 3.0 or above. A 3.0 was equal to satisfied on the scale provided, and a 4.0 was equal to very satisfied.

Qualitative

How do female superintendents describe their level of job satisfaction?

The superintendents interviewed indicated high levels of job satisfaction during the initial survey. When these superintendents were interviewed, they continued to indicate high levels of job satisfaction. They described the position as being rewarding and having impact in their work. They indicated that there were a variety of different aspects to the job that they found fulfilling. Five areas of satisfaction emerged from the analysis of the interviews:

- Creating a Vision
- Instructional Leadership
- Building Relationships
- Developing Others
- Variety of Tasks

How do female superintendents with high levels of job satisfaction describe their decisions to stay?

The female superintendents acknowledged that the superintendent's position is challenging. However, only two superintendents discussed considering leaving the position. Five discussed that they had considered moving to a different superintendency at some point; but only one actually talked about leaving the position all together.

The women superintendents had a firm vision that led their actions. They focused on the ability they had to have an impact on students. They discussed their love of students and their desire to create better schools and districts for them. Their love of the students motivated them to do the job.

How do female superintendents deal with the stresses and challenges of the position?

From the information collected during the 20 interviews, two themes arose related to this question. First, superintendents spoke about a variety of different support structures that they rely on to help them cope with the challenges of the job. The superintendents indicated that fellow superintendents, other educational professionals, and family and friends served as supports for them.

The superintendents also spoke about the importance of finding ways to balance the demands of the job. The women discussed a variety of ways that they find balance including setting boundaries and finding time for themselves. Finding balance was important for the superintendents in order to guard against burnout and allow them to decompress from the constant demands of the job.

Mixed Methods

Do the factors that female superintendents identify as being important to them relate to their overall level of job satisfaction?

The information collected during the quantitative phase and the qualitative phase of the study revealed similarities. Items that received high satisfaction scores during the quantitative phase became themes in the qualitative phase. For example, the superintendents indicated strong satisfaction with the relationships they have with others in the district. During the interviews, the superintendents spoke about the importance of building relationships as a superintendent, but also the satisfaction they found in that aspect of the job.

Implications for Practice

The women interviewed expressed high levels of satisfaction with the position. Eight of the superintendents noted their experiences of being the only female superintendent in a room; the women discussed the importance of attracting more women to the position. One superintendent said, “We need to tell them it’s worth it!” Current superintendents, professional organizations, and higher education institutions have the opportunity to actively encourage women to consider the superintendency.

Based on the findings of the study, there are ways that women can be attracted to and retained in the superintendency. One way to do this may be to encourage networking opportunities for current superintendents with women who currently hold other administrative positions or aspire to the superintendency. Providing opportunities for

current superintendents to tell their stories will allow them to share their experiences and the rewards of being a superintendent.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to examine the experiences of female superintendents as they relate to job satisfaction and retention. The study was limited to five states: Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. Future research based on the topic of this study should be expanded to a larger geographic area. Through these studies, a more in-depth understanding of women's satisfaction in the role of superintendent could be developed.

One topic that emerged during the interviews was how board relations can impact a female superintendent's satisfaction with the role. All 20 women reported strong, positive relationships with boards. However, there was mention of other superintendents' negative experiences with boards and their members. An exploration of the impact of the board of education on the superintendent's satisfaction would be an additional useful line of inquiry.

Based on the finding of this study, we offer the following propositions:

- If women assume superintendencies, then they may experience satisfaction in their work as they create a vision for a district, act as instructional leaders, build relationships, develop the skills of others, and engage in a variety of tasks.
- If women assume superintendencies, then they may choose to stay in the position because of the impact they may have through their work, and the love they feel for their students.

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