

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY  
OF WOMEN WHO ATTAIN THE SUPERINTENDENCY

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe through qualitative inquiry the professional identity that emerges as a woman attains the superintendency and to delineate those factors that facilitate and contribute to successfully attaining the superintendency. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) What patterns, themes, or trends emerge that characterize how female superintendents shape their professional identities? (2) What strategies do female superintendents use in establishing their professional identities? (3) What are the keys to successful entry into the role of superintendent? (4) Do female superintendents encounter “glass ceilings” on the way up to the position, and if so, how are they overcome?

The research design was a qualitative interview approach with descriptive methods of data collection. Seven participants were selected purposely through expert nomination on the bases of their availability, their willingness to participate, and their knowledge and experiences as women in educational leadership positions. Selections were also made according to size and geographic location of districts in which the superintendents worked, in order to study the possible differences and similarities in divergent settings. After data (interviews, informal conversations, interviewer’s observation and reflective notes) had been gathered, it was coded using domain analysis onto matrices and from these matrices, conclusions were drawn through noting patterns and themes and making comparison and contrasts.

The outcomes of this study identified that female superintendents acquisition to the position were enhanced by varied job opportunities and strong support of mentors. Themes identified in the development of a woman’s professional identity through their shared stories and narratives were **Makes a Difference for Kids, Powerful Personal Motivation and Drive, Thirst for Knowledge and Experience, and Knowing the Politics**. Additionally, other themes explored based on the data analysis were pathways to the superintendency, mentors, supportive spouses, and perceived barriers. Findings did identify the following perceived barriers that limited advancement to the superintendency: difficulty in usurping male dominance in the position, stereotyping, and a woman’s self imposed barriers. The women superintendents suggested strategies and made recommendations to aspiring female administrators.

## **Dedication**

My heartfelt thanks to my wonderful family that provided me with support and love. First and foremost, to my husband, Marty, in gratitude for thirty years of patience, support, and devotion. He believed in me enough to allow me to follow all my dreams and schemes. To my children, Jill and Todd, for being my cheerleaders and encouraging me to persevere. I am grateful to my parents, Stan and Hennie Makowski, who instilled a love for learning and the belief that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. Impossible dreams could not have come true without the blessings of St. Jude. This is for you with all my love.

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My life has been enriched by the women superintendents of this study. Thank you for your candor, humor, time, and kindness. These women truly represent successful women who are forging the pathways for the 21st century superintendent. Without you this could not be.

If richness is measured through the support of family, friends, and colleagues, then I indeed am a wealthy woman.

**To achieve all that is possible  
we must attempt the impossible-  
To be as much as we can be,  
we must dream of being more.  
Karen Ravn**

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