

PERSISTENCE AND SUPERINTENDENTS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Katherine Hamilton Howard

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological research study was to describe the lived experiences of public school superintendents with the phenomenon of persistence. Self-Determination Theory was used to describe the experiences of superintendents who have held the superintendency in the same school district for at least 5 consecutive years (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The central research question guiding the study is: *What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?* Subquestions addressed various aspects of Self-Determination Theory and persistence, including sources of motivation and goal attainment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Participants were recruited from among the 33 current superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia who have served in their positions for 5 or more years. Data was collected using a questionnaire, face-to-face interviews, and participant journals. Moustakas' (1994) method for analyzing phenomenological data was used to analyze the data collected in the research study. Themes from the analyzed data were used to craft the structural and textural descriptions of the participants' lived experiences in an effort to arrive at the "essence" of their experiences with persistence.

Keywords: persistence, superintendents, Self-Determination Theory, goal attainment, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, leadership

Copyright Page

Dedication

To Eric

*May there never be another student who feels the way you did before we could help you
I will never forget you*

Acknowledgments

When I consider all the support and encouragement I have received during this journey, thank you seems woefully inadequate, but for now, it's all I have to offer.

To my husband, Jonathan – you are still my gift from God, a gift I never deserved, a gift I will treasure for the rest of my life. Thank you for being strong when I am weak, calm when I am frantic, and focused when I am scattered. I love you.

To my children, Kylie, Jackson, Zachary, Evangeline – when you were little, I thought I couldn't love anything more than I loved your soft squishiness, sweet breath, and joyful laughter. Then you started to grow up and I fall more in love with the people you are each becoming with every day that passes. All of you are unique just the way God made you, but all of you are also brilliant, loving, hilarious, and capable. My prayer is that you will use your gifts to serve others and make the world better for those who haven't been given the privileges you have received. Thank you for giving me up for so long so I could do this work. I love you all.

To my parents, Alan and Barbara – I know what unconditional love feels like because of you. You taught me that even though I'm a woman, I am no less capable or intelligent, and you started me on the path that led to this work. Thank you for always believing in me, no matter what I've done. I love you both.

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To God – Most of the time I have absolutely no clue what You're doing in my life. But You always love me. I hope to somehow, in some way, be a useful tool for You.

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List of Abbreviations

American Association of School Administrators (AASA)

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC)

Local Composite Index (LCI)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Virginia (VA)

Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD)

Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The public school superintendency in the United States has been the subject of research since its inception, but current research has yet to explain why some superintendents stay in the same superintendency in the same school district for many years, while others serve for only a few short years. Although researchers have not reached agreement on the average length of tenure for American superintendents, most researchers report tenure lengths of between 3 (Council of Great City Schools, 2003, 2006, 2014) and 7 years (Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2003; Natkin, Cooper, & Fusarelli, 2002), depending on district size (Dlugosh, 1995) and location (Council of Great City Schools, 2003, 2006, 2014). The purpose of this study is to describe the persistence of public school superintendents in Virginia. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was used to frame the inquiry, given that SDT can explain how and why some superintendents persist and provided a richer picture of the experiences of these superintendents while filling a gap in the current literature on the superintendency (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

This chapter provides a background for the research study. There are several subsections that review my situation to the study, the problem and purpose statements, significance of the study, research questions, and operational definitions of any specific terms. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

In order to understand the problem addressed by this study and the purpose of the inquiry, several components of the superintendency should be explored, including the history of the job, the historical expectations for superintendents, and the current demands on superintendents. A

brief overview of the current state of superintendent tenure length and SDT concludes the background. This section provides a comprehensive background on the superintendency and thus, provides a foundation for the explorations undertaken in the study.

Historical Perspectives on the Superintendency

In many ways, the public school superintendency has been shaped by modern American history since the role first appeared in the mid-1800s (Griffiths, 1959). Local school boards controlled schools until the United States began to shift from a rural, agrarian society to an urban culture (Callahan, 1966). This influx of people into urban areas led to a dramatic increase in the number of public schools and many local school boards were overwhelmed with the task of supervising so many schools (Callahan, 1966). Thus, superintendents were hired to serve as master teachers, a role conceptualized by historian Raymond Callahan in his 1966 history of the superintendency as scholarly educational leader (Callahan, 1966) or teacher-scholar (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). The first superintendents were expected to provide guidance to school boards, ensure unified curriculum across schools and grades, supervise instruction, and accept responsibility for any failings of their schools (Kowalski, 2006). Although the role of teacher-scholar has never disappeared from the expectations for superintendents, its importance has diminished as other expectations have been added to the ever-changing role of the superintendency (Kowalski, McCord, Young, Peterson, & Ellerson, 2011).

The success of the Industrial Revolution brought the principles of business management to public education. As such, superintendents were expected to adopt the role of business executive (Callahan, 1966) or organizational manager (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). With the advent of this new role conceptualization, superintendents were responsible for operations and facilities management, human resources, and fiscal management (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski &

Bjork, 2005; Kowalski, 2006). During the Great Depression, the public and school boards became somewhat disillusioned with superintendents who acted like business executives, but the financial and operational skills of savvy superintendents were still valued once the resurgence of respect for business leaders appeared after World War II (Callahan, 1966). Over time, the shift of responsibility for managing the financial and operational side of schools from school boards to superintendents became permanent (Callahan, 1966).

The political turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s prompted the development of another role conceptualization for superintendents as they were expected to become educational statesmen in democratic schools (Callahan, 1966) or democratic leaders (Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents became responsible for enacting social justice and for explicitly connecting their actions with the stated aim of public schools to prepare all students to become functioning citizens in a democratic society (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). In order to achieve these ends, successful superintendents developed excellent political skills (Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002) as they competed with other social and governmental agencies for limited funds (Kowalski, 2006). With the advent of this role conceptualization, superintendents were expected to engage in political discourse at the local, state, and federal levels in order to ensure their schools and communities maintained access to funding and other forms of support for their goals (Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005).

At the same time superintendents were learning to be excellent political strategists, they were also learning to adopt the practices of social scientists to the benefit of their schools and students (Kowalski, 2006). The social science role conceptualization (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski & Bjork, 2005) was developed in response to the awarding of grants for social science research by the Kellogg Foundation to several research universities in the 1950s (Kowalski & Bjork,

2005; Kowalski, 2006), the development of the social sciences as a respected field (Kowalski, 2006), and increasing criticisms of public schools (Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents applied new knowledge about teaching, learning, and children's growth to the current practices in their schools (Kowalski, 2006). The application of research results was encouraged by large research universities, and eventually, by communities and school boards.

A fifth role conceptualization was proposed by Kowalski (2006) in response to the advent of the Information Age (Drucker, 1999). Superintendents must now be skilled communicators, a role conceptualization that is increasingly important in an era defined by the global exchange of ideas that depend entirely on appropriate communication for success (Kowalski, 2006). Although communication pervades all of the other role conceptualizations for superintendents, it is a subject unto itself since success with communication can have a tremendous impact on the success of a superintendency (Kowalski, 2006). In many ways, all five role conceptualizations guide and shape the explicit and implicit expectations for superintendents across America.

Current Perspectives on the Superintendency

Two main camps of education professors, practicing and retired superintendents, politicians, and business and community leaders influence current role conceptions of the superintendency. One group resists reforms to improve or change the role of or preparation for the superintendency, while the other works to improve the professionalism of the superintendency (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). This second group wields significant influence on the position, as evidenced by the requirement in most states that public school superintendents hold special licenses or certifications granted by the state, although some states provide for alternative processes to licensure for senior executives and military officers. For example, superintendents in Virginia must hold a Division Superintendent license, but Chief Executive

Officers and senior military officers who hold a master's degree and are recommended for employment by their school board are eligible for this license (Virginia Administrative Code § 8VAC20-22-600). The professionalism of the superintendency is also enhanced by the existence of multiple sets of professional standards for educational leaders and specifically for superintendents (AASA, 1993; CCSSO, 2015). These current interpretations of the five role conceptualizations are evidenced throughout these standards, which provide a clear picture of the expectations for superintendents in the mid-2010s.

Although the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has not changed their standards for school superintendents since 1993, these standards remain one of the primary forms of guidance for the profession. The standards address areas such as vision creation, strategic planning, advocacy, board relations, internal and external communication, fiscal and human resources management, assessment and curriculum monitoring, instructional management, and ethical behavior in a diverse community (AASA, 1993). All five of the role conceptualizations are reflected in these standards, which the AASA recognizes as lofty goals that not every superintendent can master (AASA, 1993). In the eyes of the AASA, “superintendents are dream builders for America’s children” (AASA, 1993, p. 14), and as such, high standards are desirable.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) also publishes standards for educational leaders, although these standards apply to building and division-level leaders, not just superintendents. These standards, often known by their former name of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), are frequently used to frame the preparation programs required for principals and other educational leaders in most states. As such, the practice of many superintendents is guided by these standards. The standards address areas such as vision creation,

instructional leadership for student learning, human resources and professional development management, creation of a caring and inclusive school community, resource coordination, family and community engagement, and operations management (CCSSO, 2015). Again, all five role conceptualizations are reflected in the CCSSO's (2015) standards. Even though the public school superintendency is viewed by some to be a "quasi-profession", or a job that laypeople with little to no public school teaching or leadership experience can fulfill adequately (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005, p. 90), there are significantly influential efforts to professionalize the practices and expectations for superintendents.

The Superintendency, Tenure, and Student Learning

Given the wide array of expectations placed on superintendents, it is reasonable to examine how long superintendents remain in their positions. In fact, one aspect of the superintendency, turnover and tenure length, has been under investigation since the inception of the superintendency (Callahan, 1966). Even as early as 1892, the length of a superintendent's tenure was recognized as a powerful variable affecting the success of the superintendent (Callahan, 1966). There is an impression in the popular media that the most powerful executive position in public schools is experiencing a concerning level of churn (Brown, 2015; Golden, 2014; Hackett, 2015). There is some disagreement among researchers regarding whether the rates of superintendent turnover are problematic (Natkin, Cooper, & Fusarelli, 2002; Yee & Cuban, 1996), but it is clear that for most public school districts in the United States, the days of having the same superintendent for 20 or 30 years are drawing to a close (Natkin, et al., 2002).

Research suggests that the longer superintendents remain in their positions the more likely they are to achieve their goals (Fullan, 1992, 2002) and impact student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2007). However, over the past 5 decades, tenure has been decreasing

(Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Yee & Cuban, 1996). For example, as of October 2018, 76% of superintendents in Virginia had served in the same superintendency for 4 or fewer years (see Figure 1). In April 2017, 71% of superintendents in Virginia had served in the same superintendency for 4 or fewer years (see Figure 2). In May 2016, 72% of Virginia superintendents had been in their current role for fewer than 5 years (see Figure 3.) While this statistic could describe an aging population of superintendents (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Kowalski, 2003; Meola, 2014), it is clear that tenure length for the average superintendent is slowly decreasing over time (Yee & Cuban, 1996).

Researchers have tried to explain why some superintendents stay in their jobs, or persist, for longer than a few years (Chen, 2014; Kovac, 2013; Hattar, 2013; Macaluso, 2012; Mouton, 2013; Remland, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Talbert, 2011). The phenomenon of persistence in the superintendency and its accompanying phenomenon, the decision to leave, have been examined from several perspectives, including Callahan's (1962) vulnerability theory (Mouton, 2013), Lutz and Iannaccone's (1978) dissatisfaction theory (Alsbury, 2003, 2008; Mouton, 2013), Meyer and Allen's (1997) Three Component Model of organizational commitment (Talbert, 2011), professional characteristics of long-term superintendents (Kovac, 2013; Remland, 2012) and apolitical district and superintendent factors (Hattar, 2013). Despite this research, very few people have asked sitting superintendents why they stay and no one has described this phenomenon from a qualitative perspective, from a phenomenological perspective, through the eyes of a Virginia superintendent, or from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). This study used each of these perspectives to arrive closer to an answer to the question, why do some superintendents stay in their jobs instead of leave?

Self-Determination Theory has developed over the past 40 years as a way of exploring

and explaining how and why people behave in order to meet their psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides an empirically sound basis for understanding motivation and goal achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Considering how valuable Self-Determination Theory has been in describing human behavior, especially in relation to motivation, needs fulfillment, and goal attainment, it is worthwhile to explore superintendent persistence through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Superintendents are humans with psychological needs and this research study sought to explore the experiences of these participants as people first and leaders second.

Figure 1. Years in current Virginia superintendency as of October 2018

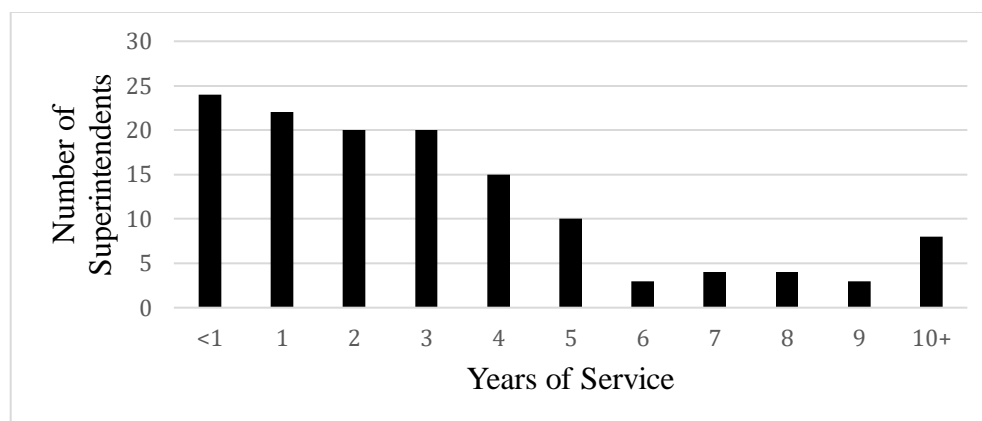


Figure 2. Years in current Virginia superintendency as of April 2017

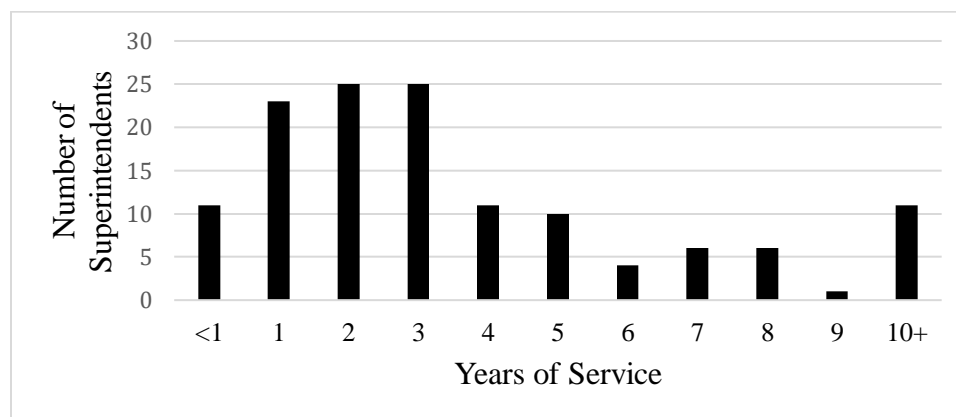
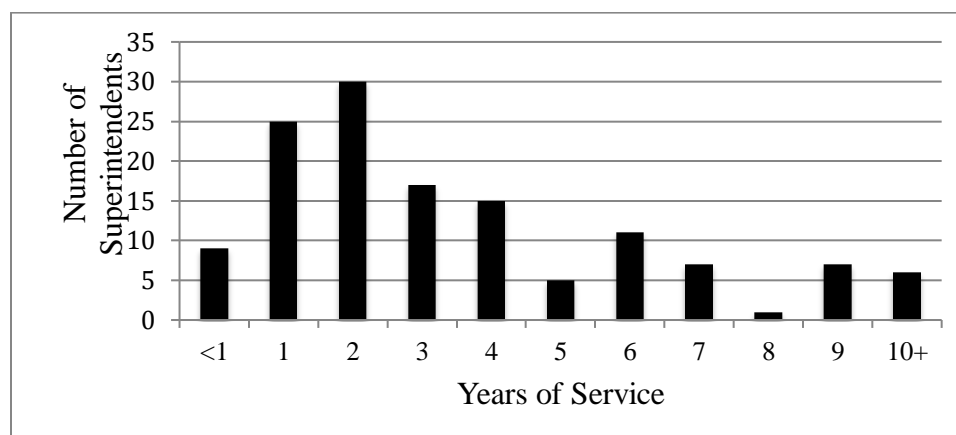


Figure 3. Years in current Virginia superintendency as of May 2016



Situation to Self

My interest in this research project stems from my own experiences as an aspiring administrator. I have always been fascinated by the lived experiences of female educational leaders. Specifically, I am curious about how successful female educational leaders balance their myriad personal and professional responsibilities as they advance through various career positions. Once I began my doctoral coursework, I quickly learned that the literature is saturated with studies on the experiences of women, but I found only a few recent dissertations and peer-reviewed studies that have examined the persistence of superintendents, regardless of gender. I realized that persistence is a construct that captures my interest in how people balance responsibilities while pursuing an executive educational leadership position. Through this study, I want to understand why some superintendents persist in their jobs when there is ample evidence of the reasons why others leave.

Although 10 of my 15 years as an educator have been in Virginia, I have very few connections to the current public school superintendents in the Commonwealth, with the exception of the superintendent of my employing district. I have met a few female superintendents at conferences over the past several years, but I have maintained no professional

or personal ties to them. I have connections within one district in which I am an employee and a parent of two public school students, thus I did not include the superintendent of this district for my study.

There were several philosophical assumptions that guided this study. Ontologically, I assumed that my participants had created and were creating their own realities based on their experiences and thoughts. Thus, I attempted to describe reality as perceived by my participants. I readily admit that my reality may not align with those of my participants, but my reality most likely expanded and changed as a result of my exposure to the realities of my participants. While the primary purpose of this study was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the participants, as reflected in their descriptions of their realities, I acknowledge that my reality was challenged over the course of this study. Epistemologically, I assumed that knowledge was created as a result of my interactions with the participants through my research design, data collection techniques, and data analysis process. I assumed that the participants and I were involved in this knowledge creation, although not always to the same degree or in the same ways. Axiologically, I assumed this research topic was important and that others, including my participants, also placed value on this topic. My participants believe that their lived experiences are important and carry value and meaning, and part of my job as the researcher is to convey the value of my participants' experiences. Methodologically, I interacted extensively with my participants in order to find the meaning in their experiences. Rhetorically, I assumed that the words of the person who had lived the experience were the most appropriate words to use. Thus, I attempted to allow the voices of my participants to come through in all of my work, including in the final description of the essence of the study phenomenon. I also allowed my voice to penetrate my work as appropriate and only when it did not prevent the sharing of my

participants' experiences.

The foundational paradigm for this study was constructivism, as I believed my participants constructed their realities over the course of their lifetimes as a result of their “lived experiences and interactions with others” (Creswell, 2013, p. 36). In many ways, the realities of my participants are still under construction since they experience new events and interactions daily. My job as a researcher was to use inductive research methods to tap into the meanings that my participants had assigned to their varied life experiences and find the common essence in those meaning-laden experiences related to the superintendency. I assumed that my participants might have revised the meaning they placed on certain experiences as they have had new experiences, so their version of reality was constantly under review and modification based on their construction of meaning in response to their experiences. The participants in this study were co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994) with me for a few reasons. First, they have direct experience with the phenomenon whereas I do not, so their impressions and thoughts formed the basis of data analysis. Their constructed realities contained the essence of the phenomenon among them, so the value of the participants and their experiences cannot be overstated. Second, the participants were co-researchers because of the amount of time and the depth of self-reflection I asked from them. I made the depth and breadth of their involvement explicitly clear in my informed consent letter and all communication because I asked for a great deal of interaction and input from the participants. Finally, the participants were co-researchers with me due to the nature of their self-reflection that resulted from the data collection methods. The participants had multiple opportunities to present their thoughts and experiences and to interact with their own data, thus they were included not only in the data collection phase of the study, but also the data analysis phase. Considering the delicate and involved nature of phenomenological research, it

was respectful and honest to treat all participants as co-researchers in this inquiry.

Problem Statement

Research suggests a general composite of the stereotypical superintendent as a seasoned Caucasian man who serves as superintendent in a single district for almost 2 decades (Chance, Ligon, Butler, & Cole, 1991). Several points of this composite seem to no longer apply to the superintendents serving public school districts in the mid-2010s in America, primarily with regard to the length of any given superintendent's tenure. The general problem addressed in this research study was that although some facets of persistence as a construct have been examined in public school superintendents who have served lengthy tenures, the current literature does not fully capture the multifaceted and deeply psychological nature of persistence as evidenced in the lives of current superintendents (Chen, 2014; Kovac, 2013; Hattar, 2013; Macaluso, 2012; Mouton, 2013; Remland, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Talbert, 2011). Current research has not answered the question of why some superintendents in the mid-2010s stay when others leave. Several recent dissertations and a few recent peer-reviewed studies have addressed individual characteristics or factors of long-term superintendents, such as leadership abilities (Antonucci, 2012; Remland, 2012; Williams & Hatch, 2012), organizational commitment (Talbert, 2011; Williams, 2012), personal characteristics such as work ethic and courage (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Hattar, 2012), and political connections (Mouton, 2013). However, there is a gap in the literature on superintendents who choose to stay in their positions (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Tallerico, Poole, & Burstyn, 1994; Tekniepe, 2015) and there are no studies that examine or describe how superintendent behaviors contribute to psychological health, motivation, goal attainment, and persistence.

Self-Determination Theory holds promise for providing some context for the persistence

of superintendents, but this theory has never been applied to this participant group (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). This research project addressed the problem that existing research does not describe the experiences of long-term superintendents in the context of Self-Determination Theory and thus, the experiences of these leaders have not been captured in a comprehensive manner (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the persistence of public school superintendents in Virginia through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Persistence in the superintendency is defined as maintaining the superintendency in one district for at least 5 consecutive years. The theory that guided this study is Self-Determination Theory as it explains the psychological need fulfillment and sources of motivation that contribute to persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Significance of the Study

This study has theoretical and practical implications for the current literature base on superintendents and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The results of this study contribute deeper insights to the question of why some superintendents stay when others leave. The results of this study provide a more complete understanding of the nature of the superintendency and the experiences and characteristics of people who persist in this difficult job. The study also extends the literature on SDT. SDT is a well-established theory of human behavior that has never been applied to executive school leadership, so this study adds to the literature base on SDT and the understanding of how SDT works in a particular participant

group.

This research project also has practical applications for anyone involved in the recruitment, retention, and support of superintendents, including school boards, superintendent preparation program leaders, and aspiring and current superintendents. School boards will benefit from understanding how they influence the motivation and needs fulfillment of current and future superintendents. They will be able to understand how their actions affect superintendent tenure length and levels of superintendent job satisfaction. University leaders who plan and implement superintendent preparation programs will benefit from understanding the role of needs fulfillment and motivation in superintendent longevity. They can broach the topic of persistence and ensure their students explore their own self-determination, psychological needs requirements, and pathways to goal attainment before pursuing the superintendency.

The research study is also significant to aspiring superintendents because it will help them understand the personal and professional implications of their career goals and allow them to fully investigate the sources of their motivation before moving into the superintendency. Finally, current superintendents who wish to remain in their positions for long periods of time will develop a greater understanding of the phenomenon of persistence and will be able to see themselves in the lived experiences of the study participants.

Research Questions

This inquiry was guided by one central question and four subquestions that aimed to capture the lived experiences of persistent superintendents while also addressing the main aspects of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Central Question

What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?

There is a gap in the literature on superintendent longevity, tenure, turnover, and persistence (Tekniepe, 2015). Existing research does not fully explain or describe the characteristics of superintendents who persist beyond the current average tenure length of 5 to 7 years (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Tallerico, Poole, & Burstyn, 1994). There is no sufficient answer to the question, why do some superintendents stay when so many others leave? The central research question of this inquiry sought to provide an answer to this question by exploring the construct of persistence as evidenced through the experiences of current long-term superintendents. This question also guided the description the lived experiences of the participants, which is the most critical element of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Since the participants have experienced the phenomenon of persistence, they were the best people to describe their experiences and by doing so, their experiences shed light on the phenomenon itself. The only way to gather this kind of intricate, detailed, rich data was by asking the participants about their experiences as they lived them, without interpretation or analysis from the researcher. Once the participants' experiences were recorded, the data was analyzed through eidetic reduction to distill the unifying essence common to all of their experiences (Gill, 2014). This reductive process can only occur in the context of the central research question, which captured the purest expression of the participants' experiences.

Subquestion One

How does maintaining the superintendency meet the autonomy, competence, and relatedness

needs of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?

The three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are foundational to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). When these needs are met, people are psychologically healthy and they strive to accomplish fulfilling goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It stands to reason that if the participants choose to enter into (Boyland, 2013) and remain in a difficult job that has little guaranteed positional security (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Eaton & Sharp, 1996; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Yee & Cuban, 1996), then some or all of their needs must be met in that job. This question seeks to connect needs fulfillment with the participants' decision to remain in the superintendency.

Subquestion Two

How do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency describe their sources of motivation?

The various forms of motivation as explained in SDT can help explain the choices people make, just as their choices and their descriptions of those choices can shed light on the sources of their motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2002). By asking long-term superintendents to describe what motivates them, information about their needs fulfillment, goal attainment, and psychological well-being can be ascertained (Ryan & Deci, 2002). All of these aspects help describe and elucidate the construct of persistence as evidenced in the participants' lives.

Subquestion Three

What supports do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency cite as valuable?

Even if the participants cannot connect specific sources of support for specific decisions they have made over the course of their lives, the mere presence of any support structures can describe and explain their decisions. Self-Determination Theory insists that the basic psychological needs are met in the context of an autonomy-supportive environment, which then influences a person's sources of motivation and eventual goal attainment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). This question seeks to connect specific sources of support with participants' decisions that have influenced their persistence in the superintendency.

Subquestion Four

What goals do persistent superintendents set, why do they set them, and how do they pursue them?

Research on SDT has determined that goal content and the processes by which goals are attained influence the outcome of goal pursuits (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This question seeks to describe the kinds of goals pursued by persistent superintendents and the actions or plans taken by the participants to achieve their goals. Research has also determined that motivation influences goal attainment and well-being (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). This question also seeks to connect the motives for goals set by persistent superintendents and their persistence in a difficult job. The basic psychological needs, all forms of motivation, and various support structures all inform goal content, goal motivation, and goal pursuits (Deci & Ryan, 2002); thus this question can elucidate the application of SDT in the lives of the participants.

Definitions

Definitions of specific terms used throughout this prospectus are listed below:

1. *Autonomy* – to voluntarily choose in a way that is reconciled with one's self; "the

experience of integration and freedom” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231).

2. *Competence* – having a positive influence on one’s surroundings; “having an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231).
3. *Extrinsic motivation* – completing an action in order to gain or avoid something; “doing something because it leads to a separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 55).
4. *Intrinsic motivation* – completing an action for the sake of the action itself; “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 55).
5. *Persistent superintendent* – any superintendent who has maintained the superintendency in the same public school district for at least 5 consecutive years. Interim superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and managers do not meet these criteria.
6. *Relatedness* – “the desire to feel connected to others” (Deci & Ryan, 2000),
7. *Tenure* – the number of consecutive years one person spends as superintendent in the same school district (Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006).

Summary

There has been a tremendous amount of turnover among public school superintendents in Virginia in recent years, but not all superintendents have quickly left their positions. There are many reasons cited in the current literature to explain why superintendents leave their jobs, but fewer reasons to explain why some superintendents stay. The study used a transcendental phenomenological research design and Self-Determination Theory to explore the phenomenon of superintendent persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) and fill the gap in the literature.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The problem addressed by this study was that there is a gap in the existing research on the experiences of superintendents who persist in the same superintendency beyond the average length of tenure (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Tallericco, Poole, & Burstyn, 1994; Tekniepe, 2015). This study used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to describe the lived experiences of superintendents who remain in the same position for 5 or more years (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Chapter Two describes the theoretical framework and literature base that form the foundation for this study. The main tenets of SDT are described, including its explanation of psychological needs, how those needs are met, the various forms of motivation, and how people pursue goals. The current and historical literature related to this study is also presented to establish the context and support for the study. This study applied SDT to the experiences of current long-term superintendents in Virginia to expand and enrich the understanding of persistence in the superintendency in this participant group.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of theoretical frameworks in qualitative inquiry is to justify this research study and to guide the research design, methodology, and research questions (Maxwell, 2013). The following section grounds the research study in a theory that provides a framework for the phenomenon under investigation: persistence in superintendents.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory is a macrotheory of human behavior and motivation that was proposed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in the mid-1980s (Deci & Ryan, 1985a; Deci &

Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). It is comprised of several sub-theories (Ryan & Deci, 2002), including cognitive evaluation theory (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1980), organismic integration theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Ryan & Connell, 1989), causality orientations theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985a), and basic needs theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). At its core, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) seeks to explain human needs and how people strive to fulfill those needs. There are several components of SDT that pertain to this study of persistence in long-term superintendents in Virginia, including the basic human needs, the several types of motivation, the causality orientations, and goal pursuit. All of these components impact a person's sense of self and their overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002), factors that can influence a superintendent's decision to stay or leave a given position.

The overarching premise of SDT is that "all individuals have natural, innate, and constructive tendencies to develop an ever more elaborated and unified sense of self" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 5). This sense of self is marked by "a sense of wholeness, vitality, and integrity" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 3) which can be evidenced in both hedonic and eudaimonic ways (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2006). Hedonia focuses on the outcome of happiness, while eudaimonia focuses on the processes of "living well" (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2006, p. 139). For the purposes of the study, it was not necessary to parse out the minute differences between these two states, but it is helpful to keep them in mind as the job satisfaction, goal pursuits, and personal and professional decisions of long-term superintendents are examined.

SDT proposes that all humans, regardless of temporal, geographical, cultural or other contexts, share the same three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Autonomy is acting freely in a way that matches one's self-concept, so it encompasses the constructs of volition, freedom, and

integration (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Merely being able to choose to behave in a certain way is not sufficient for autonomous behavior according to SDT because there must be an element of choosing to behave in a way that is aligned with one's sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence is an ability to affect one's environment in a valuable way (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence includes an element of self-confidence in one's ability to effect a "valued outcome" on one's environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Relatedness is the desire to give and receive love, caring, and respect (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Relatedness is not about being a member of a specific group, but instead involves "the psychological sense of being with others in secure communion or unity" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7). According to SDT, all human behavior stems from the desire to fulfill all three of these basic needs.

In SDT, the construct of motivation arises from the basic psychological needs. SDT proposes a continuum of motivation consisting of 5 types, including amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, regulation through identification, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Amotivation, the state of having no desire or intention to act, is at one end of the continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Intrinsic motivation, the state of "doing an activity out of interest and inherent satisfaction" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 17), is at the other end of the continuum. The other four types of motivation fall into the broader category of extrinsic motivation. External regulation is the form of extrinsic motivation that is closest to amotivation and is easily thought of as behavior that seeks to get some kind of reward or avoid a negative consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Next on the continuum is introjected regulation, which is behavior that involves the ego, such as saving face or avoiding guilt or shame (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Regulation through identification moves along the continuum, closer to intrinsic

motivation, as evidenced by its definition as “an acceptance of the behavior as personally important” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 17). People who are regulated through identification have come to see the value in behaving a certain way, but have not yet integrated the value of the behavior into their sense of self. Integrated regulation is the form of extrinsic motivation that is closest to intrinsic motivation and includes behavior that demonstrates the person has fully integrated the value of the specified behavior into his or her sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2002). None of the forms of regulation are considered to be intrinsic motivation because the actions are engaged in to achieve an outcome, not for the sake of the actions themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Intrinsically motivated people engage in certain behaviors simply because they enjoy the behaviors, regardless of the outcomes.

All forms of motivation in SDT inform what Deci and Ryan (1985a, 2000) call causality orientations (1985a, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Every person has each of the three causality orientations: autonomy orientation, controlled orientation, and impersonal orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985a), but each person tends to lean towards one orientation over the others. The autonomy orientation is marked by a “high degree of experienced choice with respect to the initiation and regulation of one’s own behavior” (Deci & Ryan, 1985a, p. 111). People who lean towards this orientation evidence a high degree of self-determined behavior as marked by initiative and behaving “on the basis of interests and self-endorsed values” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 21). The controlled orientation involves behaving as a result of extrinsic motivators, not intrinsic as with the autonomy orientation. People who lean towards this orientation often behave in response to external controls such as expectations, deadlines, and directives (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Defiance and compliance fall into the controlled orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). The impersonal orientation involves amotivation and a lack of intentional behavior (Ryan & Deci,

2002). People who lean towards this orientation tend to think their behavior is out of their control and that it is not possible for them to behave in such a way as to achieve desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Deci and Ryan (1985a) have found that self-determined behavior is often promoted by the autonomy orientation. People who are intrinsically motivated to act and who view themselves as having volitional control over their behaviors and choices are more self-determined and demonstrate well-regulated psychological health and goal attainment (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

The final element of SDT that pertains to the research project is goals and how they are determined and accomplished. SDT proposes that the goals that people strive for, both in content and motive, affect their self-determination and are affected by their self-determination (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). What people choose to pursue is important to their psychological well-being, since the “what” of the goal points to the source of the goal and whether it is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000). How people go about achieving their goals is also important, since the degree of control over how the goal is reached and the origin of the goal attainment path also affect self-determination and well-being (Sheldon, et al, 2004). People who choose their goals solely for the sake of the goal itself and then are able to choose how they accomplish that goal tend to show more self-determined behavior, greater needs fulfillment, and overall psychological health (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory and Superintendents

There is no research that explicitly examines superintendent persistence in light of SDT; however, the current research on SDT informs the research study in terms of leadership constructs and persistence in other job fields. Much of the current literature on SDT examines employee satisfaction and performance when managers employ certain elements of SDT (Graves

& Luciano, 2013; Graves, Sarkis, & Zhu, 2013; Hardre & Reeve, 2009; Kovjanic, Schuh, Jonas, van Quaquebeke, & van Dick, 2012; Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012; Williams, Halvari, Niemiec, Sorebo, Olafsen, & Westbye, 2014), so although these studies might be useful for understanding SDT as a cohesive macrotheory, they do not offer much in terms of understanding persistence in the superintendency. There is also some research using SDT in an executive coaching context (Kinsler, 2014; Spence & Oades, 2011), but the focus is on enhancing coaching practices, which again does not add much to this study of long-term superintendents.

A few recent studies of SDT pertain to this study in terms of motivation, needs fulfillment, and goal attainment. There is evidence that extrinsic motivation is positively correlated with job burnout (Roche & Haar, 2013), and that pay becomes an increasingly important factor in work environments that are unsupportive of needs satisfaction (Olafsen, Halvari, Forest, & Deci, 2015). When people's needs are met, especially for autonomy and competence, they are intrinsically motivated at work and pay becomes less of a concern (Olafsen, et al, 2015). Although goals related to performance at work can meet one's competence needs, they appear to do so only at the expense of one's relatedness needs as met in the family context and in fact, has a negative impact on overall life satisfaction (Masuda & Sorthaix, 2012). The life goals to which people aspire exert a great deal of influence on well-being at work (Roche & Haar, 2013). Extrinsic and negative goals can negatively impact one's psychological health at work, just as intrinsic and positive goals can have a positive impact (Roche & Haar, 2013).

Not only did the participants choose to remain in their superintendencies, but they also exhibited sufficiently acceptable actions in order to maintain their employment and not fall prey to involuntary turnover. The research project posits that examining the persistence of these

superintendents through the lens of Self-Determination Theory not only provided needed information about the nature of the superintendency and those who occupy it, but also provided an increased understanding of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Related Literature

In order to ground this research study in the existing research on superintendents and their experiences with persistence, a comprehensive review of the literature is presented. Several subsections are included to explain the various facets of the superintendency that inform this research study and to describe the current knowledge base about persistent superintendents. This literature review sets the stage for the qualitative inquiry about the lived experiences of persistent superintendents in Virginia.

Superintendents and District Size and Location

Superintendents in Virginia serve all types of school districts, including large, medium, and small districts, as well as rural, suburban, and urban districts; thus, the impact of district size and location on the superintendency must be explored in order to understand the participants' experiences. There are two points of clarification to be considered while reviewing the literature on this topic. First, most rural school districts in Virginia serve a comparatively smaller number of students, but the districts of at least one participant included large sections of rural land while also educating thousands of children. The experiences of superintendents in these districts can mirror those of superintendents in larger districts as a result of increased supports and bureaucracy (Howley, Howley, Rhodes, & Yahn, 2014). However, the bulk of this section of the literature review discusses the superintendency as it has been studied in the traditional small rural district. Second, while there is at least one study that determined that district size and demographics do not impact superintendent turnover (Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, &

Ghosh, 2003), the literature on the superintendency in various districts is put forth in order to describe the experiences of others in the superintendency, not necessarily to pinpoint the reasons why they leave. Other research into the reasons cited by superintendents for their decisions to leave their posts is examined in another section of the literature review. This section, and the sections on race and gender that follow, help to describe the rich, complex experience of being a superintendent, as described by people of various backgrounds that may be shared by the participants of this study.

Rural superintendents share many of the same challenges faced by superintendents in other locations, such as law, policy, finance, personnel, and federal and state mandates (Lamkin, 2006). However, they also face challenges that are specific to their context. For example, rural superintendents sometimes feel that they are personally responsible for the financial health of their districts (Lamkin, 2006), which can face consolidation (Howley, et al, 2014) or school closure (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011) if the superintendent fails as a financial manager. Many rural communities do not have the industrial or business base enjoyed by urban school districts (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011) and what industry they have may be challenged or drying up in response to economic changes (Howley, et al, 2014). A changing economic picture can force a community to fund its schools at levels that do not allow the schools to meet their needs (Howley, et al, 2014), regardless of the increased demands on all school districts to improve student performance (Lamkin, 2006). In some states, these financial struggles can lead to the perception that rural schools are not equitably funded (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Although rural school districts are certainly not the only school districts that struggle with finances, the ramifications of financial troubles can be felt more acutely by the rural superintendent than those of more urban districts.

The rural community is also different from suburban and urban communities. As Howley, et al. (2014) point out, it is difficult to imagine large urban areas such as Philadelphia as a single, insular community. Most rural communities, however, are exactly that: tight-knit communities comprised of families who have lived in the same locations for generations (Lamkin, 2006) and who have long memories for negative experiences with superintendents (DeYoung, 1995). These communities can have expectations for their superintendents that differ from those for superintendents in suburban or urban areas (Copeland, 2013), but those expectations usually include the superintendent displaying a great deal of pride and involvement in the community (Copeland, 2013; Copeland & Chance, 1996) and an accurate interpretation of the culture of the community (Copeland & Chance, 1996). Superintendents who do not correctly negotiate the cultural nuances of their rural communities can find themselves subject to delicate and difficult politics that can result in the dismissal or resignation of the superintendent (CASE, 2003; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). For example, some rural districts are experiencing dramatically increasing numbers of non-white students enrolling in schools situated in communities that have traditionally been comprised of primarily white residents (Howley, et al, 2014). These rural communities sometimes respond with biases, prejudices, and misunderstandings that can negatively affect students (Rhodes, 2011). Rural superintendents in these situations must be able to adeptly navigate this and other delicate political situations while still advocating for all students.

Oftentimes this delicate political dance occurs in the athletic field stands and church pews of small rural communities in which the superintendent is significantly more visible and accessible to the community than superintendents in suburban and urban districts (Copeland, 2013; Jenkins, 2007; Kamrath, 2015; Lamkin, 2006). In small rural communities, people notice

when the superintendent does not attend school and community events (Jenkins, 2007; Kamrath, 2015). Community members even take note of which church the superintendent attends and how much he or she tithes (Copeland, 2013). This considerable lack of privacy means that the rural superintendency is a very public position (Lamkin, 2006) and as a result, community members come to expect a high level of visibility and transparency in their superintendents (Jenkins, 2007). In larger districts, the bureaucratic hierarchy of the central office can protect the superintendent from such extreme visibility, but no such protection exists in small rural districts with no one in the central office but the superintendent (Lamkin, 2006).

Adding to the increased visibility of rural superintendents is the expanded job description created by a lack of bureaucratic hierarchy for division of labor. Rural school districts often do not have the financial resources to employ the large numbers of central office staff that suburban and urban districts can, so the duties that would be addressed by staff fall almost entirely on the superintendent (Kamrath, 2015; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Lamkin, 2006). Common analogies used by superintendent participants in some studies include “jack of all trades” (Lamkin, 2006) and having to “wear many hats” (Copeland, 2013; Kamrath, 2015). These analogies convey a sense of not only high levels of scrutiny of rural superintendents, but also a sometimes overwhelming list of duties, including student performance, personnel, financial management, operations, communication, strategic planning, testing coordination, and professional development. Essentially, everything that is accomplished by many directors and assistant superintendents in large districts must be accomplished by a single rural superintendent. This formidable workload can create tension between the various roles embodied by a single superintendent, such as spouse, parent, and adult child caring for aging parents (Reecks-Rodgers, 2013; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). As bleak as this picture may be, there is at least one study that

provides some comparative hope for rural superintendents. Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate (2008) found that personnel and organizational challenges were less of a concern for rural superintendents than superintendents in urban and suburban districts. As with many other jobs, if the right person is in the superintendency in a rural community, the stresses and scrutiny may be manageable and not detract from job satisfaction.

There are a few other points from the research to consider when examining the rural superintendency. The rural superintendency has been shown to be the only district size category that is staffed by nearly identical numbers of male and female superintendents (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Approximately 40% of rural superintendents hold a doctoral degree, which is significantly less than superintendents in other districts (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). The lack of a doctorate can limit the marketability and appeal of superintendent candidates, which leads to less credentialed candidates aiming for rural superintendencies (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000) and to rural districts struggling to hire superintendents with their doctorates (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Rural districts can be viewed as “starter districts” (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996, p. 659) that are not desirable placements except for new superintendents who need to gain experience before moving to larger, more prestigious districts (Lamkin, 2006). However, there are some superintendents who choose to work in rural districts, not as a stepping stone, but as an avenue for social justice, close community relationships, and a slower, calmer way of life (Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2014).

In contrast, urban districts are perceived as the most stressful locations for the superintendency and principals express the least amount of interest in becoming superintendents in urban areas (Boyland, 2013; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). Grissom and Anderson (2012) found that larger districts tend to have higher turnover rates among superintendents. They

also found that superintendents tend to move from districts that offer lower salaries to those that offer higher salaries and from districts with lower student enrollment to those with higher student enrollment (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). There does seem to be a relationship between district size and superintendent salaries, and since urban districts tend to serve a larger number of students, it is possible that they pay larger salaries (Council of Great City Schools, 2014).

Superintendents of larger districts are isolated from parents, teachers, and community members, whether they want to be isolated or not (Howley, et al., 2014). The bureaucracy necessary to ensure the efficient and effective operation of large districts prevents superintendents from forming close relationships with most stakeholders and isolates the superintendent from the full effects of decision-making on constituents. Depending on the perspective of the superintendent, this isolation could be desirable or undesirable. Other reasons cited for moving between districts include moving to be closer to larger population centers for cultural and graduate study opportunities (Dlugosh, 1995), which are often fulfilled in urban areas. Considering that almost 80% of superintendents of large districts hold a doctorate (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000), larger districts can afford to be more selective in their hiring decisions and superintendents who want to move to larger urban areas for the myriad benefits know what credentials they need to possess.

In terms of research on suburban school districts, the results present a patchwork understanding of the superintendency in these districts. While 75% of superintendents in medium-sized districts hold their doctorate and most superintendents are attracted to leading suburban districts (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000), once they earn the credentials to obtain these coveted positions, they may find that their leadership practices do not completely match those conveyed in current research, which tends to more fully address urban leadership practices

(Thompson & France, 2015). In fact, there is a general dearth of research on the suburban superintendency itself. Since this study drew participants from some of the many suburban districts in Virginia, the research base was broadened simply because there is so little research on these districts.

African American Superintendents

There is a relative paucity of recent research on African American superintendents, but there has also been an increase in the number of dissertations seeking to explore and describe the experiences of African American superintendents in the past 5 to 10 years. This is somewhat understandable, but also perplexing when the current rate of minority superintendents is 6% (Kowalski, et al, 2011). On the one hand, this is such a small number of people that research into their experiences may not be rewarding. On the other hand, there are questions to be asked involving this low rate of minority superintendents. Many dissertations and studies of minority superintendents have focused on the experiences of African American female superintendents (Alston, 2005; Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Beard, 2012; Brown, 2014; Davis-Jones, 2013; Goffney, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Jones, 2013; Katz, 2012; Loder, 2005; Martin-Ogburn, 2012; Pouncey, 2012), while only a few have included the experiences of African American male superintendents (Chalmers, 2012; George, 2011; Howard, 2014). Where possible, this section of the literature review aims to address elements of these studies that apply to both genders, while teasing out any gender-specific elements in the following section.

One of the most notable elements of the research on African American superintendents is a focus on the reasons cited by aspiring, current, and former superintendents for why they pursue and maintain the superintendency. Considering that many African American candidates for the superintendency are hired primarily in large urban school districts with low student performance

and a wide range of other problems (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011), exploring the motivations of these superintendents becomes an intriguing endeavor. It should be noted that although African American superintendents serve shorter tenures in large urban districts, they are often paid more than White superintendents (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). There is no evidence that African American superintendents serve in this role because of the higher salary, but there is also no evidence that superintendents of any other racial or ethnic background are choosing the superintendency for the money. The differences in both tenure and salary help describe the context in which some African Americans lead their school districts.

While money is not cited as a motivating reason to pursue the superintendency, research shows that African Americans are driven by four types of reasons. First, many African American superintendents want to make a difference in the lives of children and they feel they have something to offer students and teachers (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Escobedo, 2011; Johnson, 2012). Many African American superintendents believe in the transformative power of educational leadership (Escobedo, 2011; Johnson, 2012), especially the power of African American educational leaders who embrace a style of leadership that differs from the traditional competitive styles used by other superintendents (Smith, 2013). The varied ways that African Americans lead cannot be recognized and embraced if they are not present in the places of power, so many African American superintendents pursue and stay in the superintendency in order to “be at the table” (Brown, 2014, p. 591). Especially in large urban districts and other places, such as the South, African Americans work to be present and to express themselves merely so their voices are heard and not discounted (Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2012).

A deep desire to ensure disenfranchised voices are heard is connected to the second reason for entering the superintendency cited by African American educational leaders. These

leaders strive to use their position and power to effect positive changes for social justice (Alston, 2005; Johnson, 2012; Rosilez, 2011). As a result of their experiences as minorities in the public education system and in American society overall, many African American superintendents work to ensure other minorities, including students and their families, have the same opportunities and equality that majority children do (Johnson, 2012; Rosilez, 2011). These leaders see social justice as a natural outworking of their care for children and their desire to improve public schools (Alston, 2005).

For some African American superintendents, this drive for social justice stems from their faith and belief in God (Alston, 2005; Jones, 2012). This third often-cited reason for choosing the superintendency forms the foundational philosophy of these superintendents and impacts their motivation and actions (Jones, 2012). They possess a sense of calling (Jones, 2012) that drives them to perform their duties with excellence and to allow their faith to influence their care of children (Alston, 2005). Their faith also drives them to conduct themselves with “honesty and integrity”, which contributes to a sense of respect and trust in the students, families, and teachers they lead (Jones, 2012). Their faith also influences their ability to cope with barriers and persistence in the face of struggles (Jones, 2012).

The final reason cited frequently by superintendents for their desire to pursue and maintain the superintendency is family influence and parental expectations (Jones, 2012; Pouncey, 2012; Smith, 2013). Many African American superintendents pursue their positions in order to meet the expectations of their families, especially their mothers, that they will lead, serve, and succeed at high levels (Pouncey, 2012; Smith, 2013). These superintendents take their responsibility to fulfill these family expectations very seriously and thus, they pursue not only the superintendency, but also the higher education and other credentials necessary to obtain and

maintain a successful superintendency (Pouncey, 2012). Sometimes, African American superintendents never intended to ascend to the superintendency, merely to serve in some capacity as an educational leader; however, they decided to accept the superintendency in response to pressures from family (Jones, 2012). All four of these reasons cited by superintendents, including family expectations, faith in God, a desire to effect social change, and an insistence on being heard in the halls of power, can help motivate African American superintendents as they encounter a myriad of challenges before and during their superintendencies.

One of the most pervasive challenges faced by African American superintendents is oppression in response to their race. For participants in some studies, race definitely affected their path to and work in the superintendency (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Beard, 2012; Chalmers, 2012; Jones, 2012; Pouncey, 2012; Rosilez, 2011; Smith, 2013), but others encountered no barriers stemming from their race, either in their pursuit of or persistence in the superintendency (Loder, 2005). Participants describe encountering political barriers and stereotyping (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013), white privilege (Chalmers, 2012), recommendations to straighten hair and act passively (Beard, 2012), and general institutional racism (Jones, 2012; Smith, 2013; Webb, 2013). In one study, 40% of the participants stated that their ethnicity was a stressor in their professional lives (Pouncey, 2012), which implies that some African American superintendents are not experiencing what they perceive to be challenges stemming from their race. This conclusion is reiterated in other studies (Jones, 2012; Loder, 2005), especially those conducted with superintendents who are relatively new to the position. The longer a superintendent has been serving in that role, the more they have experienced problems stemming from their race (Jones, 2012).

Another challenge that affects how African American superintendents cope with challenges arising from their ethnic background is the lack of adequate professional and community support systems (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Chalmers, 2012; Webb, 2013). It is common to find the “good ole boy network” at work in Southern states and often there is no similar network for African Americans (Webb, 2013). More formal mentoring and professional networks are lacking (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Chalmers, 2012), which prevents aspiring and current African American superintendents from accessing other professionals who can vouch for them and help overcome challenges (Webb, 2013).

This lack of support extends to the African American community surrounding the African American superintendent. Some superintendents are unpleasantly surprised when they find that African American constituents expect them to perform favors or grant special requests for them, primarily because the superintendent knows what it is like to be a minority and thus would want to help others in the same community (Howard, 2014). Not only do community members expect favors from African American superintendents, but so do African American professionals within the school district (Webb, 2013). When the African American superintendent does not promote other African Americans based on their race, as opposed to qualifications, sometimes negative responses ensue (Webb, 2013). In fact, sometimes the response escalates to emotional or psychological violence as African Americans who feel slighted or threatened by African Americans who aspire to or have attained the superintendency respond by ignoring, criticizing, sabotaging, questioning, or humiliating the victim (Duffy, 1995; Hastie, 2007; Martin-Ogburn, 2012). Instead of making room for and supporting all qualified African Americans who aspire to the superintendency, some African Americans intentionally hurt others in their efforts to remain in power (Martin-Ogburn, 2012). Although the research does not reveal that this is a common

problem, it is significant enough to warrant consideration.

Whenever there are challenges, African American superintendents must find coping strategies to move past the challenges. First, many use their innate talents to motivate them through the tough times. For example, since many African American superintendents are skilled at “crossing borders” between the dominant culture and their own culture, they can use these skills to help them reach people in other minority culture groups (Katz, 2012, p. 772). Second, many African American superintendents use their skills with relationship-building to allow their work to help them meet their need to provide caring and receive a feeling of relatedness from others in the community (Beard, 2012). By using an ethic of care, these superintendents maintain their motivation for problem-solving through strong relationships (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Beard, 2012; Chalmers, 2012; Katz, 2012; Pouncey, 2012; Rosilez, 2011; Webb, 2013). Third, many African American superintendents choose to adapt and possibly assimilate with the dominant culture in order to cope with challenges (Collins, 2002; Jones, 2012; King, 1998). Assimilation and adaptation strategies include adjusting one’s physical appearance and voice modulation and adjusting how one behaves in different situations (Collins, 2002; King, 1998). By adjusting their approaches in these ways, African American superintendents are like “chameleons”, able to cope and work successfully within a variety of environments (Jones, 2012, p. 185).

By far, the coping strategy used most commonly by African American superintendents is building a personal support network (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Beard, 2012; Chalmers, 2012; Escobedo, 2011; Howard, 2014; Johnson, 2012; Jones, 2012; Pouncey, 2012; Smith, 2013; Webb, 2013). When professional mentors are hard to find, some African American superintendents find their own (Escobedo, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Webb, 2013). Community

support from within both the dominant culture and the African American culture is also paramount, and most successful African American superintendents are able to garner widespread support from community members (Chalmers, 2012; Howard, 2014; Jones, 2012; Pouncey, 2012). The support of family is also heavily influential on African American superintendents, both as they aspire to the superintendency and as they maintain it (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Beard, 2012; Johnson, 2012; Jones, 2012; Smith, 2013). The influence of strong maternal figures in the lives of some African American superintendents is also a striking support structure (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Smith, 2013), although parental support in general is also impactful (Beard, 2012; Johnson, 2012). Even though African American superintendents may face formidable challenges in their professional and personal lives, successful superintendents seek and create coping strategies and support structures that impact their longevity in the superintendency.

Superintendents and Gender

Unlike research on African American superintendents, there is no lack of research on the superintendency and gender, especially female superintendents. Before reviewing the literature base on the challenges faced by and coping strategies implemented by female superintendents, and on the specific experiences of African American female superintendents, a brief review of the research on fundamental demographic information on male and female superintendents is in order.

The research on salaries for male and female superintendents is conflicting and seems to depend on the location of the employing school district. In 2013, Burkman and Lester used descriptive statistics to study the salaries of male and female superintendents in Texas and found no statistically significant difference in their salaries. In some districts in Texas, women were

paid higher salaries than men (Burkman & Lester, 2013). Dowell and Larwin (2013) used a survey research design to study the salaries of superintendents in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio and found significant differences in the salaries paid to female superintendents when compared to those paid to male superintendents. The Council of Great City Schools (2014), in its regular report on the superintendency, found that female superintendents are paid significantly less than men, regardless of the size of the school district. The data on the tenure of male and female superintendents is also conflicting. In some cases, men serve longer tenures than women (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000), while in others they serve shorter tenures (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). Considering that 24% of current superintendents are women, these facts about salary and tenure differences are concerning (Kowalski, et al, 2011).

Not only are there differences in salary and tenure between the genders, but the paths used by men and women to access the superintendency are also different. Women tend to teach longer than men, but men tend to serve in administrative positions other than the superintendency longer than women (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Thus, men move into administrative positions sooner than women and bring more years of experience as administrators to potential superintendencies (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Male superintendents also tend to have served as athletic coaches at some point in their careers at significantly higher rates than women: 63% for men compared to 14% for women (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Both male and female superintendents tend to have experience teaching at the secondary level, but more women than men have also had elementary experience (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Both men and women tend to obtain their credentials prior to applying for a superintendency, but men are more cognizant of their desire to become a superintendent than women, who do not always strive for the position and are convinced or asked to pursue it (Munoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley, 2014).

Men also apply for the superintendency earlier in their careers and more frequently than women (Munoz, et al., 2014). Sometimes, women do not even apply for the superintendency but still land there through a variety of means, such as being chosen without completing a formal application process (Munoz, et al., 2014). This finding helps shed light on a finding by Dowell and Larwin (2013) that more women than men are hired as superintendent from within their current district. No matter how they get to the superintendent's office, there is no statistically significant difference in the leadership effectiveness of men and women (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014).

Men and women both seem to pursue the superintendency of their own volition, not because of any external factors (DiCanio, et al., 2016). Both groups also express similar levels of satisfaction with the job of superintendent (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Young, Kowalski, McCord, & Peterson, 2012). In 2014, Klatt conducted a case study of two superintendents, one man and one woman, and asked questions about satisfaction in both the workplace and the home. While the results reported by the female superintendent were reflective of the rest of the research on women and the role, the results from the male superintendent were somewhat unique in the literature base. This participant reported struggling to find happiness and a balance between work and home and he was dismayed when his home life suffered as a result of his work as a superintendent (Klatt, 2014). He felt pressure in both spheres to behave in ways that were mutually exclusive, such as being fully present both at home and in the office (Klatt, 2014). He had a very difficult time managing his stress levels and had to reorient himself to both the office and the home in order to find some kind of satisfaction (Klatt, 2014). This stance is echoed in a qualitative survey study that Hawk and Martin (2011) conducted to investigate stress relief in male and female superintendents. Some male respondents did not believe they could

express or healthily cope with their stress levels because of their “pride” (Hawk & Martin, 2011, p. 373) and their perceptions that others would think less of them if they discussed their stressors. Other than these two studies, there is nothing in the research about male superintendents and their job satisfaction, work/home balance, and stress levels.

There is a plethora of research on the various challenges faced by female superintendents. Specific challenges mentioned in the research include gaining access to the superintendency (DiCanio, et al., 2016; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Munoz, et al., 2014; Shakeshaft, 2011; Tallerico, Poole, & Burstyn, 1994), balancing work and family obligations (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Loder, 2005; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013; Robinson, 2013; Roebuck, Smith, & El Haddaoui, 2013; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; Wallace, 2014; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009), and coping with self-imposed challenges (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013; Shakeshaft, 2011). One of the most prevalent challenges faced by women who want to become superintendents is gaining access to the job. Women are educated, credentialed, experienced, and in all ways qualified and yet they still struggle to be appointed superintendent (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Shakeshaft (2011) noted that given the current rate of increase in women superintendents, it would take over 75 years for women to be proportionately represented in the superintendency (p. 215). Considering that women are offered the superintendency less than 30% of the time when they interview while men are offered the job 70% of the time (Munoz, et al., 2014), Shakeshaft’s (2011) concerns seem warranted. No matter if the path to the superintendency is viewed as being blocked by a glass ceiling or a glass maze consisting of various jobs and credentials that must be acquired by women before they can ascend (DiCanio, et al., 2016), it is clear that the path is dominated by men (Tallerico, Poole, & Burstyn, 1994).

Once they attain a superintendency, women often find that the job creates tension for them at home. While there is at least one study in which the female superintendents reported having no struggles with balancing home and work (Reecks-Rodgers, 2013), most of the other research stresses the difficulties of running a home and a school district simultaneously (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Loder, 2005; Robinson, 2013; Roebuck, Smith, & El Haddaoui, 2013; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009; Wallace, 2014). Some women have school-age children at home (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009), while others are caring for aging parents (Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). Additionally, not all women have the same support from their spouses that male superintendents do (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Loder, 2005; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Sometimes these pressures can become so extreme that they are cited as reasons for women leaving the superintendency (Robinson, 2013; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). Many women are cautioned to consider the long hours required in the superintendency (Wallace, 2014) and whether they feel ready to accept that delicate balance between home and work that is required of the superintendency (Roebuck, Smith, & El Haddaoui, 2013). The long hours of most superintendents' days often come from the increased demands on the time and work output of superintendents, as compared to their workload in other positions. The superintendency itself is a high stress position, but sometimes the problems faced by female superintendents are exacerbated by their gender (Grogan, 2008; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Work reasons such as conflict with the school board or community and feelings of isolation and loneliness are also cited as prompting women to leave the superintendency (Robinson, 2013; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009).

While some of the expectations placed on female superintendents stem from the various people in the women's lives, such as spouses, children, parents, students, community members,

and school board members, some challenging expectations are self-imposed by the superintendents. An example is self-imposed expectations for work performance that go above and beyond the usual expectations for superintendents (Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). Another is the timing of childbearing versus the timing of pursuing and accepting the superintendency (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). A lack of confidence and poor self-esteem also negatively impact female superintendents (Shakeshaft, 2011). Many, if not all, of these self-imposed challenges are highly emotional and can affect perseverance in the superintendency (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010).

Not only is there a variety of challenges facing female superintendents, but there also is an array of strategies used to cope with these challenges. These include the timing of childbearing (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kelsey, Allen, Coke, & Ballard, 2014; Loder, 2005), accessing available support networks (Johnson, 2011; Kelsey, et al., 2014; Loder, 2005; Roebuck, Smith, & El Haddaoui, 2013; Wallace, 2014), and cultivating an adaptive mindset (Alston, 2005; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013; Roebuck, Smith, & El Haddaoui, 2013). Some women choose to delay either having children or accepting a superintendency in order to create sufficient space in their lives for one or the other (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kelsey, et al., 2014; Loder, 2005). Viewing this delay as a personal choice can help the woman superintendent feel some ownership over her decisions, which mitigates negative feelings that arise in response to the tension between work and home.

When this balance or the job of superintendent itself becomes overwhelming, many women turn to their support networks. These networks can comprise of spouses, parents, children, colleagues, mentors, and friends (Johnson, 2011; Kelsey, et al., 2014; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010), although some women do not report their spouses as frequent supports

(Roebuck, Smith, & El Haddaoui, 2013). One way in which aspiring female superintendents can locate a healthy support network is to be choosy when looking at potential employing school districts (Wallace, 2014; Young, Kowalski, McCord, & Peterson, 2012). They can look for qualified support staff and an overall good fit with the community and the school district. Just having competent, willing staff who know and respect the female superintendent can provide support and lessen challenges.

Female superintendents who rise above challenges and enjoy successful superintendencies tend to display a unique mindset that is focused on purpose and creative problem-solving. Some women adopt a mindset guided by integrating their work and home lives and approaching this dynamic in a holistic way, as opposed to thinking of these two spheres as in competition with each other (Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). This kind of mindset can be seen in the contract negotiations of some female superintendents when they ask for leave to care for children and flexibility in attendance at social events, and convey a general attitude of putting their family first in their negotiations with the board (Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). This reliance on creative problem-solving not only of contract negotiations but also of accessing the superintendency can be seen in the various jobs some women take as they ascend the career ladder (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Some women find ways to combine “the traditional masculine path with the feminine path” on their way to the superintendent’s office (Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 105). Finally, some women rely on their faith to give them a mindset characterized by perseverance (Alston, 2005). When there are few external supports and many external challenges facing aspiring and current female superintendents, sometimes the most immediate source of help is the woman herself.

The research base encompasses literature not only on the experiences of White women, but also of African American women, who are subject to the “multiple jeopardy” of both race

and gender (King, 1988). African American women face their own version of the glass ceiling as they encounter difficulties ascending to the superintendency as a result of their race and gender (Jones, 2012). While African American male superintendents are able to follow much the same path to the superintendency as White men, African American women are usually not able to do the same (Chalmers, 2012). Many African American women must settle for accepting superintendencies in districts that are experiencing significant problems instead of being chosen for more desirable school districts (Chalmers, 2012). It is remarkable how the glass ceiling morphs for African American women, becoming “a wall high and strong, a barrier at times preventing women from advancing because of the hardships previously endured by women of color in the districts” (Pouncey, 2012, p. 95). As difficult as it may be for White women to attain and maintain the superintendency, it appears to be that much harder for African American women.

African American women who have succeeded in attaining a superintendency have crafted their own versions of common coping strategies. In contrast to White women, African American women who aspire to the superintendency are more likely to delay moving into administrative positions and instead choose to have children (Loder, 2005). Thus, these women are more likely to have to cope with caring for children while also performing well enough as an administrator to move up the career ladder. More seasoned African American women often rely or have relied on their female relatives to help care for children and to complete household tasks, whereas younger African American women find help either in their spouses or in paid help (Loder, 2005). Although these differences between African American and White women are small, they might have been more significant if this study had drawn in more African American or female participants and should not be discounted in future research.

Tenure and Turnover Rates

Tenure is generally defined as the number of consecutive years one person serves as superintendent in the same school district (Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006). Researchers have been unable to agree on the average length of superintendent tenure since tenure rates became a significant topic of research almost 20 years ago. Average lengths of tenure reported in the current literature range from a low of 2.3 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2000) to a high of 7.25 years (Fusarelli, Cooper, & Carella, 2003). Other averages reported in the literature include 2.75 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2003), 3.1 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2006), 3.18 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014), 3.8 years (Tallerico, Poole, & Burstyn, 1994), between 4 and 5 years (National School Boards Association, 2002), 5.0 years (Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006), 5.8 years (Dlugosh, 1995; Yee & Cuban, 1996), between 5 and 6 years (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), 6.5 years (Natkin, Cooper, & Fusarelli, 2002), and 6 to 7 years (Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2003). In some cases, there are reported differences in length of superintendent tenure based on gender (Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006), district size (Dlugosh, 1995), and district location (Council of Great City Schools, 2003, 2006, 2014). Byrd, Drews, and Johnston (2006) found that superintendents who remain in one district for longer than 5 years often stay for approximately 10 years, while those who have changed districts in the past 5 years have been with their current district for only 3.2 years. This finding resonates with a preference found by Kamrath and Brunner (2014), a preference by rural community members that their superintendents remain with their districts for between 7 and 9 years.

Even though researchers cannot reach consensus on the average length of superintendent tenure, it is clear that tenure lengths are declining over time. In their study of urban

superintendent tenure between 1900 and 1990, Yee and Cuban (1996) found that average tenure length declined by more than half. They also discovered that superintendent tenure length increases and decreases in a cyclical manner, even though the overall trend has been downward (Yee & Cuban, 1996). This trend is especially alarming when one considers Fullan's (1992) recommendation that the minimum length for superintendent tenure to effect educational reform is 5 years. There is no research that states whether the current average superintendent tenure length is increasing or decreasing at this time, although the latest edition of the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) decennial study of the superintendency found that 41% of superintendents have less than 5 years of experience in the superintendency (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

Other researchers have reported on rates of turnover, as opposed to tenure length. The 2010 study by AASA also found that approximately 51% of the responding superintendents intended to remain in their positions until 2015 (Kowalski, et al, 2011). Eaton and Sharp (1996) found turnover rates ranging from 30% in one year to 70% in 5 years, while Grissom and Anderson (2012) found a turnover rate of 45% in 3 years. All of these data suggest substantial turnover is occurring within the public school superintendency.

These changes in the rates of turnover and lengths of tenure are not generally interpreted as positive. Community members like their superintendents to remain in the same school district for at least 7 years and ideally at least 9 years (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). School boards go to great lengths and sometimes great expense to recruit and hire qualified, competent superintendents, so repeating this process every few years can be burdensome (Beagle, 2012; Berryhill, 2009; Cooper, Fusarelli & Carella, 2000). Research also suggests that superintendents need longer than the current average tenure length to accomplish goals regarding student

academic performance (Fullan, 1992, 2002). However, there can be small bright spots to high rates of turnover for some districts. When rising stars come to smaller districts, they may be looking for ways to distinguish themselves from other superintendents, so they may be more willing to apply for grants or bring other benefits to their current districts (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). Besides this consideration and the necessary impact of shorter tenures as a result of removing incompetent superintendents, there are few benefits to shorter tenure lengths.

One final point to consider in the discussion about superintendent tenure length is a point raised in Kowalski's 2003 discussion about the superintendency. In some ways, tenure length may not matter because different superintendents require different lengths of time to make an impact in their districts (Kowalski, 2003). Some may achieve their goals within a few years, while others may never achieve their goals, no matter how long they remain in the superintendency. In general, if a school board is diligent in finding a superintendent who fits well with the district and is able to achieve the goals set out by the school board, then a longer tenure length usually benefits the community and the superintendent.

Superintendents and Student Learning

Researchers have been trying to determine the effects of superintendent leadership on student achievement for many years, with conflicting results. In the past 10 years, five significant quantitative studies have determined that an aspect of superintendent tenure or leadership positively contributes to student achievement (Hough, 2014; Myers, 2011; Plotts & Gutmore, 2014; Simpson, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Waters and Marzano (2007) conducted a large meta-analysis of 27 studies on the impact of district leadership on student achievement, and they found a statistically significant positive relationship between district leadership and student achievement, resulting in a correlation of .24. This effect size is small according to Cohen's *d*

(1988), but is still statistically significant at the .05 level. They also found a weighted correlation average of .19 between length of superintendent tenure and student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2007). These results are supported by Myers' (2011) findings that in elementary schools in Kansas there is a significantly positive impact on student achievement as a result of the length of superintendent tenure. Tenure length is also supported by Simpson's (2013) findings that "the longer a superintendent serves in a rural Appalachian district, the more growth the district experiences in overall student achievement" (p. 21). Adding to the list of recent researchers who have been able to quantitatively determine a positive impact of superintendents on student achievement, Plotts and Gutmore (2014) found that a superintendent's years of experience in that position positively impacts the negative effects of eligibility for free lunch programs on student achievement on standardized tests. Not even student attendance rates had as strong an effect on standardized test scores as did a district leader's years of experience as a superintendent (Plotts & Gutmore, 2014). Hough (2014) found that student scores on math and reading tests were higher in districts led by superintendents who underestimated or accurately assessed their impact on student achievement. Scores on math and reading tests taken by students led by superintendents who overestimated their level of performance in the area of accountability were significantly lower (Hough, 2014). There is significantly less qualitative data on the subject of superintendent impact on student achievement, but there are those who believe the right leader can positively affect struggling school districts (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001).

Not everyone agrees that superintendents or their leadership positively affect student achievement. Yee and Cuban (1996) documented a lack of a "predictive relationship between specific administrator actions and organizational outcomes" (p. 634) and could not establish whether long or short-term superintendents are able to create and maintain educational reforms.

More recent studies report no statistically significant impact of superintendent turnover or even the position of superintendent itself on standardized test scores (Alsbury, 2008; Chingos, Whitehurst, & Lindquist, 2014). In fact, the general conclusions of these dissenting studies are “that superintendent turnover has little or no meaningful impact on student achievement, and certainly is not associated with improvements on student test scores” (Chingos, et al, 2014, p. 10). There is some acknowledgement that perhaps superintendents affect other aspects of public education, including finances and relationships with the community (Chingos, et al, 2014), but these elements have not been studied as much as student achievement. In fact, some superintendents have fallen prey to inaccurate assessments of their positive influence on students, when in fact, they have had a negative impact on student performance (Whitt, Scheurich, & Skrla, 2015). However, these study results do not diminish the general impression by the public and many superintendents that district leadership has an effect of some kind on student achievement.

Pressures and Stressors on Superintendents

It should come as no surprise that the public school superintendency is often viewed as a stressful, demanding job (Boyland, 2013). Some communities view their superintendents in the same way they view their local government officials or business leaders (Jenkins, 2007) and as such, they are subject to a high level of public criticism (Jazzar & Kimball, 2004). Many superintendents work in excess of 80 hours per week (CASE, 2003) and they must balance a significant number of duties and expectations. Superintendents are often expected to attend many school functions, to be an extremely good manager, planner, and communicator (Copeland, 2013), to be constantly available to all constituents (Tobin, 2006), and to relate well to all stakeholders (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). In light of these incredible expectations, the quality

of a superintendent's life is not often considered (Klatt, 2014). For some superintendents, this apparent belief that the superintendent will be all things to all people and never buckle under the pressure can take a toll on one's family life and one's satisfaction with life in general (Klatt, 2014). In a case study of two superintendents, Klatt (2014) found that the more one superintendent tried to force some semblance of balance in his life, the more he found that the superintendency did not allow for much time in other life roles, such as parent or spouse. The second participant in this study described her job as her life and did not attempt to do anything but integrate the superintendency fully into all of her other life roles (Klatt, 2014).

All superintendents must find some way of relieving stress or engaging in self-care activities in order to persist in their jobs. Hawk and Martin (2011) found that exercise was listed as the most frequently used and the most effective stress-relieving activity used by superintendents. Other coping mechanisms included taking vacations, talking with a mentor, engaging in relaxing activities such as yoga, and drinking (Hawk & Martin, 2011). No matter how a superintendent copes with stressors, it can be encouraging to hear that with time, superintendent perceptions of pressures such as financial and personnel issues diminish (Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008). Although all superintendents strive to control their stress and to manage the pressures placed on them, sometimes the internal and external pressures on them can lead them to consider leaving their superintendencies (Tekniepe, 2015).

Why Superintendents Leave

Given the pressures that most superintendents experience, turnover of some kind is to be expected. The reasons for turnover cited in the current literature are varied and complex. Grissom and Anderson (2012) cautioned that the various types of superintendent turnover can be explained by different predictors. Alsbury (2003) explained that there are many apolitical

reasons for superintendent turnover, such as retirement or moving for family reasons. Other reasons cited by superintendents for leaving their positions include poor relations with the school board, politics with the schools and community, better opportunities for career advancement or for their families (Alsbury, 2003; Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

All superintendents in Virginia are appointed by elected school boards, and the relationship between these two entities receives much attention in the current literature. The relationship between the superintendent and the school board, both as a whole group and as individual members, is paramount (Allen, 1998; Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Fusarelli, Cooper, & Carella, 2003; Tekniepe, 2015). Considering that superintendents' employment with school districts depends entirely on the governing school board, it is logical that poor relations with the board would be cited frequently in the literature as a primary reason for superintendent turnover (Allen, 1998; Brown, 2014; Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006; Colorado Association of School Executives, 2003; Rausch, 2001). Tenure length can easily be cut short by school boards and some researchers report that the more difficult the relationship between the superintendent and the school board, the shorter the superintendent's tenure (Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006).

The political nature of the superintendency is another frequently cited reason for superintendent departure (Alsbury, 2003; Boyland & Ellis, 2015; Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006; CASE, 2003; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Skott, 2014; Tekniepe, 2015). For example, superintendent tenure decreased in districts that experienced a high tax increase when compared to districts that experienced low tax increases (McAdams, 1995). Issues with politics can prompt sitting superintendents to either retire or leave for another position (Boyland & Ellis, 2015; Byrd, Drews, and Johnston, 2006). Savvy superintendents keep the power of the politicians in the forefront of their minds (Skott, 2014) because community dissatisfaction can

result in superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2003). Other politically related reasons for superintendent exits include poorly negotiated employment contracts that offer no protection against politically motivated dismissals and poor relations with people who help the superintendent carry out action plans, such as building administration and central office staff (Tekniepe, 2015).

Researchers also report that superintendents leave their jobs to pursue different or better opportunities for their families or career advancement (CASE, 2003; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Some superintendents move from one district to another to be closer to larger population centers for cultural opportunities and opportunities for graduate study or to be closer to family members (Dlugosh, 1995). Byrd, Drews, and Johnston (2006) reported that 62.5% of their respondents left their superintendencies for better opportunities in other districts. Even superintendents who have not left their posts yet report they would move for improved or challenging career opportunities or for family responsibilities (VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009).

Why Superintendents Stay

After reviewing all of the negative reasons that drive superintendents to leave their positions, it is worthwhile to consider the reasons for staying cited by superintendents who persist in their current jobs. While researchers have not been as interested in understanding why superintendents stay as they have in exploring why they leave, and there are researchers who identify this as a gap in the literature base (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Tekniepe, 2015), there is some current research in this area. Some superintendents remain in their jobs because they love their jobs and communities, and they enjoy a high level of support from their communities (Ramirez & Guzman, 1999). When superintendents feel valued and experience self-efficacy in their jobs, they choose to stay (CASE, 2003). Some superintendents stay because of a personal

belief in God and a sense of calling to the superintendency as a means of caring for children and communities and of using their gifts (Alston, 2005). Others remain because they believe strongly that diverse voices should be heard in the superintendency (Brown, 2014). Many superintendents chose to move into such a stressful and public role because of a desire to “have a positive impact on more students” (Boyland, 2013, p.102) and the vast majority of superintendents reports that the superintendency has given them satisfaction (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). Even in a job with so many reasons to leave, some superintendents do choose to stay longer than their peers.

Summary

This chapter served to ground the research study in a theoretical framework and the current literature on the study topic. There are several dissertations and peer-reviewed studies on superintendent longevity and persistence, but their findings remain relatively surface and do not plumb the depths of how those who persist engage in self-determined behavior that results in needs fulfillment and goal attainment. This study sought to elucidate the experiences of the participants in a new way, in light of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Chapter Three describes the methodology of the research study of the lived experiences of long-term superintendents in Virginia with persistence. An inductive methodology underpinned the entire study and informed the research design, research questions, data collection methods, and data analysis processes. The setting, participants, procedures, and my role as the researcher are also explained in this chapter. Steps to ensure trustworthiness and to address ethical concerns are described.

Design

This research project explored questions that are personal to the participants and to me (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The study explored and described the participants' experiences with a specific phenomenon, but this exploration and description could only be achieved by spending time with the participants and asking them to detail how they experienced the phenomenon and what their experiences meant to them (Creswell, 2013). There were no quantifiable variables to be measured, but instead my goal was to arrive at a "complex, detailed understanding" of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Since data collection for this study consisted primarily of interviews and the interviews asked participants to discuss highly personal topics, I conducted the interviews in a natural setting of each participant's choice, as opposed to an experimental or laboratory setting (Patton, 2015). For these reasons, a qualitative approach was best suited for this study.

Within the qualitative inquiry realm, the phenomenological approach was appropriate in order to achieve the goals of the study. Through the research questions, data collection methods, and data analysis methods, I have provided an answer the question, "why do they stay?", a

question that seeks to describe the specific phenomenon of persistence. This phenomenon is a shared lived experience that is distinguishable from other lived experiences and I have explored the essential essence that makes this phenomenon unique (Van Manen, 1990). I collected “direct descriptions of the experience” from the participants (Van Manen, 2014) and then used inductive and deductive reasoning to distill the descriptions to the “universal essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 76; Moustakas, 1994). For these reasons, the phenomenological approach was best suited for this study.

Within the phenomenological category, transcendental phenomenology was the most appropriate approach for this study. I have no experience as a superintendent, so I could not share in the participants’ experiences as a persistent superintendent; thus, a hermeneutic approach was not appropriate because my life experiences could not allow me to successfully interpret the participants’ experiences. In addition, I did not interpret the experiences of the participants as this was unnecessary. Their experiences spoke for themselves and the inherent meaning of their experiences came from the essences of the phenomenon, not from my interpretations (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological research design allowed me to look at the lived experiences of my participants with fresh eyes, as free from bias as possible, and thus allowed Husserl’s edict of “back to things themselves” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 70) to remain true. In order to achieve this end, I engaged in the epoche process to bracket out my biases, impressions, and experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By thinking and writing about any preconceived notions or assumptions I had about the superintendency at various points throughout this study, my goal was to approach the data with an unbiased, fresh perspective and to allow the essence of the participants’ experiences to come through the data without being affected by my assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). In order to transcend my ego and

allow me to explore and describe the lived experiences of the participants, I engaged in epoche (Moustakas, 1994) before collecting data.

Although my participants were co-researchers with me because they explored and reflected on their experiences through the data collection and analysis processes, they did not engage in epoche because their experiences and reflections were key to the process of distilling the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The people who experienced the phenomenon are the only ones who can describe it, so my job was to collect their experiences and to discern the meaning as it applies to them, not me (Moustakas, 1994). I was the primary instrument and as such, I did not interpret, but instead I collected, explored, and described. Thus, epoche was a necessary first step for my transcendental phenomenological exploration of the phenomenon.

The next step in this research design process was data collection and data analysis, which occur simultaneously in transcendental phenomenology. As I collected data from my co-researchers, I began the process of phenomenological reduction, in which I used inductive and deductive reasoning to work out the noema and noesis as they related to themes (Moustakas, 1994). The noema is the object, or the phenomenon itself, while the accompanying noesis is the act and process of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), both of which are key to exploring the phenomenon. Another way of thinking of the noema-noesis relationship is that the textural or “what” of the experience is the noema, while the structural or “how” of the experience is the noesis (Moustakas, 1994). Both of these elements are required, as they comprise the essential essence of the phenomenon. One of my jobs as the primary instrument was to get my participants to describe not only what happened to them in vivid, detailed description (Van Manen, 1990), but also what they thought about what happened to them (Moustakas, 1994). Without the two

components of noema and noesis, any themes that I derived from the data would be groundless and would not adequately describe the lived experiences of the participants. As I collected data, I began the process of deriving themes from meaningful statements from the participants. At the beginning of data analysis, all significant statements were as important as any other. This leveling of the meaningful statements, or horizontalization, allowed all themes to carry the same weight (Moustakas, 1994), which was important to ensure no possible element of the essence was missed. The process of phenomenological reduction, with its emphasis on establishing the noema-noesis relationship and horizontalization, was key to the success of the next stage in data analysis, the imaginative variation and eidetic reduction, and to the eventual crafting of the composite essence of the phenomenon.

The process of imaginative variation allowed me to dig deeper into the noesis to understand how the participants experienced persistence. In the subsequent step of eidetic reduction, the themes derived from analysis of each participant's data were clustered and continually compared to the data to reduce them to only those that were truly common among the participants, and to those that provided the textural and structural descriptions that were essential to the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the resulting textural and structural descriptions from each participant were synthesized into an essence of the phenomenon as evidenced by the final themes (Moustakas, 1994). This conclusion of the data collection and analysis methods signified the ultimate goal of the transcendental phenomenological research process.

Research Questions

Central Question

What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school

superintendency?

Subquestions

1. How does maintaining the superintendency meet the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?
2. How do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency describe their sources of motivation?
3. What supports do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency cite as valuable?
4. What goals do persistent superintendents set, why do they set them, and how do they pursue them?

Setting

The setting for the study was the Commonwealth of Virginia, as represented through the public school districts of the participants. There is a great deal of variability in the demographic characteristics of Virginia's public school districts, including location, population size, racial and ethnic makeup, and predominant socioeconomic status and religion. The district characteristics of the participants who participated in the study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. District Characteristics

Participant	District Name Community Name	District Enrollment	District Type
Charlotte	Claremont District Claremont	1,000-5,000	Rural
Clark	Cartersville District Catalina	1,000-5,000	Rural
Crosby	Harbor District Sydney	1,000-5,000	Large suburban

John J	Jupiter District	5,000-10,000	Town and rural
	Jupiter County		
John R.	Freemark District	5,000-10,000	Rural
	Freemark County		
Monroe	Simple District	20,000-25,000	Midsize suburban and rural
	Township County		
Prince	World Class District	25,000+	Large suburban and rural
	Prince County		
Ricky	Richee City District	10,000-15,000	Large suburban and rural
	Richee		
Steven	Starling City District	1,000-5,000	Midsize suburban
	Starling		
Wilson	Wilson District	1,000-5,000	Midsize suburban and rural
	Wilson		

In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, certain district characteristics must be described in general terms. For example, the locale boundaries from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) were used to determine whether the communities in which the participants' school districts are situated could be considered urban, suburban, or rural. The National Center for Education Statistics uses 12 categories to define locale boundaries, but these categories were combined where appropriate. Fringe rural, remote rural, and distant rural are represented as rural in Table 1.

District enrollment is based on the fall membership enrollment data for the 2017-2018 school year (Virginia Department of Education, 2018b). In the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Local Composite Index (LCI) is an indicator of a school district's ability to contribute to education expenses (Virginia Department of Education, 2018a) and can serve as a useful indicator of how much the local community can support its school district without needing additional funding from the state. The LCI for 2018 through 2020 runs from .1754 to .8000, with the lower numbers representing less ability to pay (VDOE, 2018a). Again, matching the participants' districts with their real LCI could violate confidentiality, so this data is not reported in Table 1. However, all districts in this study have LCIs in the .2000 to .3000 range, except for

one in the .6000 band. In summary, the districts represented by the participants of this research study consist of primarily suburban and rural communities that require a certain level of additional funding from the Commonwealth and educate small, medium, and large numbers of students.

Participants

A criterion sampling procedure (Creswell, 2013) was used to select a purposive sample (Patton, 2015) of current public school superintendents in Virginia who have served at least 5 consecutive years in their current position. By reading current and archived school district and media publications, I determined that 30 of the 132 superintendents in Virginia as of April 2017 met these criteria. After securing Institutional Review Board approval, I emailed via publicly provided data all of these participants. After receipt of signed informed consent documents from the volunteers, I sent an electronic questionnaire that included questions about each participant's demographical information. Participants chose their pseudonyms to facilitate confidentiality. More specific information on each participant is provided in Chapter Four.

The number of participants in phenomenological studies often varies, but Creswell (2013) recommends between 5 and 25 participants. I was able to secure 10 participants who completed all of the data collection methods, which is well within Creswell's (2013) recommendations and meets Liberty University's requirements for qualitative dissertation studies (Liberty University, 2017). Since certain themes and comments began appearing in all data, I believe that data saturation was reached upon the completion of data collection from these 10 participants (Francis, et al., 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Procedures

I received Institutional Review Board approval for this study in May 2017, and in July

2017 I began the recruitment process by mailing a recruitment letter and stamped informed consent form to the 30 possible participants (Appendices C and B). I also emailed the recruitment letter and stamped informed consent to the same 30 possible participants (Appendix D). Contact information was obtained via publicly available sources, such as the Virginia Department of Education's website and the individual school district websites. When possible participants emailed their desire to not participate in the study, I made note of their refusal and did not contact them again. When possible participants emailed their desire to participate in the study, I asked for the signed informed consent letter, if they did not attach one in their original reply. Some participants mailed their signed informed consent letters to me and once I received them, I scanned the hard copies and attached them to my next email, which also included a link to the electronic questionnaire (Appendices E and F). If participants emailed their signed consent forms, I replied with the link to the electronic questionnaire. If I received no response to either the hard copy or email recruitment letter within two weeks, then I emailed the exact same recruitment letter and stamped informed consent form a second time. After conducting 5 interviews, I sent a follow-recruitment email to the possible participants who had not responded to any of the previous recruitment solicitations (Appendix G).

As the participants completed the electronic questionnaire, I scheduled interviews with each participant, using the information they had indicated on their questionnaire. Before conducting any interviews, I wrote an interview protocol and printed hard copies of the interview questions for each interview (Appendices I and H). I recorded all of the interviews with two recording methods, the Voice Memo function on my personal iPhone and a handheld voice recorder with a micro SD card. The Voice Memos were saved under each participant's pseudonym and immediately uploaded to my password-protected iTunes account to listen to

during transcription. The interviews on the micro SD card were transferred to my password-protected personal computer.

When participants indicated they were open to conducting a virtual interview, I asked each participant to choose between Google Hangout or Skype and we exchanged contact information for the chosen platform. The same recording devices were used for the virtual interviews. In two circumstances, the virtual connection became unreliable and both the participants and I became concerned that we were missing comments from the other, so we switched to the telephone. It was not possible to use both recording devices for the phone interviews, so I used the more reliable voice recorder and held it between my ear and the receiver to ensure it picked up all comments from the participants. Although somewhat uncomfortable for my ear, this method did capture both interviews clearly and did not hinder transcription of either interview, as verified by the first member check. At the conclusion of each interview, I used the Voice Memo function to record my field notes of the interviews and later transcribed those field notes.

I began transcribing interviews immediately upon completion. I listened to each interview once, then listened to it again while transcribing, then listened to the interview a third time while reading the transcript for errors. Then in order to fulfill the first member check, I emailed the transcript to the participant and made all changes requested by the participant.

I mailed notebooks and printed copies of the journal prompts (Appendix J) to the first 3 participants, but in the interest of time and with participant permission, I either emailed the journal prompts or brought printed hard copies to give to the participants at the interviews. Some participants sent me audio recordings of them speaking their responses, so I transcribed those responses and included that transcript with the first member check. Other participants added their

responses to the body of an email, which I transferred to a Word document to facilitate computer-assisted data analysis. Finally, I typed the handwritten responses from the participants who used the Moleskine journals and compared them to the originals to ensure accuracy. My goal was to ensure all of the data was in a form that could easily be used to analyze the data, both by hand and with the help of the ATLAS.ti program.

After data analysis was completed and the themes and findings were described, I emailed these themes and the answers to the research questions for the second and final member check. All participant feedback was incorporated in the findings of this study.

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher, my primary role was to serve as the instrument for the duration of the study (Creswell, 2013). Throughout data collection and analysis, I was responsible for disclosing my biases, assumptions, and any information that may have affected my research process (Patton, 2015). Arriving at an essence of persistence in this context would have been impossible without a certain measure of interpretation on my part, so I attempted to ensure that I was transparent about my thoughts and conclusions while I collected and analyzed data.

In that vein, my relationship to the study, setting, and participants should be disclosed. I am currently employed in a public school district in Virginia and I have a working relationship with my current superintendent, so she was excluded from the main study. I have never been a superintendent, although it is a career move that I may consider at some point in the future. I have held an administrative position at a private school, but this role did not put me in personal or professional contact with any superintendents, nor did it give me experiences equitable to those experienced by superintendents. I have no authority or influence over any of the participants. Prior to this study, I had not met or interacted with any of the participants.

Data Collection

Three data collection methods were used, including short answers on an electronic questionnaire, interviews, and responses to journal prompts. Multiple forms of data were collected in order to achieve triangulation for data analysis and to enhance the credibility of my conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

Questionnaire

The first form of data collection was an electronic questionnaire to gather demographic data and ask several questions about goals, goal motivation, and goal pursuits (Appendix F). These questions anticipated more concrete responses from participants, answers that could be communicated adequately in a short-answer format. Of the various constructs in SDT, those regarding goals, goal motivation, and goal pursuits are better suited than others to the short-answer format of a questionnaire. Thus, in order to ensure all data collection methods reflected some part of SDT and to probe deeply into goal setting constructs, the questionnaire focused primarily on these constructs. This questionnaire was researcher-created and sought to gather qualitative data, not quantitative (Patton, 2015).

Table 2.

Standardized Questionnaire

	Questionnaire Question	Research Question
1	Please provide the following demographic information: Name, pseudonym of choice, age, gender, ethnicity/race, school district name, marital status, number and age of children	Demographic information
2	Describe any goals you've set for your superintendency.	4
3	Why have you chosen these goals for your work?	4
4	How have/will you accomplish these goals?	4
5	Describe any personal goals you've set for yourself .	4
6	Why have you chosen these goals for yourself?	4
7	How have/will you accomplish these goals?	4

Question 1 gathered basic demographic information that helped inform the context of the

participant's superintendency. This question also allowed the participant a chance to choose his or her own pseudonyms to encourage confidentiality. Questions 2 through 7 aimed to provide the participant with an opportunity to discuss professional and personal goals. The short answers provided in response to this questionnaire provided information to supplement other data and to be explored further in the face-to-face individual interviews.

Interviews

Interviews are the primary method of collecting data in qualitative studies, as they allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Interviews allowed for a personal description of the superintendents' experiences with persistence (Patton, 2015) and they formed the backbone of data collection in this study.

One interview was conducted with each participant, most in a face-to-face setting, such as in person or via video conferencing programs. Two interviews started via video conferencing, but technical problems required the interviews to be completed via phone. All interviews were conducted in locations of the participants' choice, such as their offices or meeting rooms near their offices. These interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions that allowed for freedom in participant responses (Patton, 2015). All interviews were audio recorded, with the permission of the participants, with two recording devices and were transcribed verbatim to allow for member checking and data analysis. I wrote field notes after each interview to facilitate participant portraits ensure I could provide a complete description of the interview for use during data analysis. A final draft of the interview guide is included in Table 3 and Appendix H.

Table 3

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Interview Question	Research Question
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1	Tell me about yourself. <i>Possible probes:</i> Your childhood, family, background, hobbies, interests.	Rapport, demographics
2	Tell me about your career before becoming a superintendent. <i>Possible probes:</i> What made you choose teaching as a career? How long were you a teacher? What made you decide to become an administrator? If participant did not take a traditional path to the superintendency, ask: Why did you choose your initial career?	2, 4
3	How would you describe your motivation for pursuing a career in education?	2
4	Why did you choose to become a superintendent? <i>Possible probes:</i> How did you get the idea to become a superintendent? What goals does the superintendency help you achieve?	1, 2, 4
5	How would you describe your motivation for pursuing the superintendency?	2
6	Describe how you reached the superintendency. <i>Possible probes:</i> Any specific choices or decisions?	1, 2, 3, 4
7	How would you describe your motivation for remaining in the superintendency?	2
8	How would you describe your district? <i>Possible probes:</i> What about your district appeals to you? Why did you choose to become a superintendent in your current district? What is special or unique about your district that influenced your decision to become a superintendent here?	1, 2, 3
9	Describe what it's been like as a superintendent in your district. <i>Possible probes:</i> How have the size and location of your district impacted your superintendency? How have the size and location of your district impacted your motivation to stay?	1, 2
10	How has your relationship with the community affected your decision to remain in the superintendency? <i>Possible probe:</i> Please give an example that describes your relationship with the community.	1, 3
11	How has your relationship with the school board affected your decision to remain in the superintendency? <i>Possible probe:</i> Please give an example that describes your relationship with the school board.	1, 3
12	How has your superintendency impacted your marriage? Your family? Your parenting? Your friendships? Your "me time"? Your self-care?	1, 2, 3
13	What supports allowed you to reach the superintendency? <i>Possible probes:</i> mentors, spouses, children, university professors, teachers and other employees, religious faith	3
14	What supports help you continue in the superintendency? <i>Possible probes:</i> professional networks, other superintendent	3
15	How does the superintendency allow you to feel connected to other people? <i>Possible probes:</i> How does the superintendency allow you to care for others and to be cared for by others?	1

16	Describe how the superintendency allows you to experience a sense of competence.	1, 2
17	Describe how the superintendency negatively affects your sense of competence.	1, 2
18	Describe how your experience autonomy in the superintendency.	1
19	What challenges to your autonomy do you experience in the superintendency?	1
20	For female participants: Describe what it's like being a female superintendent. <i>Possible probes</i> : What challenges have you faced? What successes have you had?	1, 2
21	For minority participants: Describe what it's like being a minority superintendent. <i>Possible probes</i> : What challenges have you faced? What successes have you had?	1, 2

The goal of all of the questions in the individual interview was to help the participant describe his or her experiences with persistence and to describe specific elements of persistence in the context of SDT. Question 1 established rapport and aimed to put the participant at ease, an emotional state that set the tone for the rest of the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Questions 2 and 3 continued to build rapport by asking for rote information about the participant's professional background while also providing the participant a chance to begin to discuss his or her motivations. Questions 4 through 7 allowed the participants to hone the focus of their answers to their superintendency in particular, while encouraging them to continue to discuss their motivations and goal attainment. Questions 8 through 19 delved deeply into the areas of supports, motivation, and needs fulfillment in terms of relatedness, competence, and autonomy, especially in the context of frequently cited reasons for superintendent departure (Fusarelli, Cooper, & Carella, 2003; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Questions 20 and 21 were asked only of the female and African American participants to give them a chance to describe their experiences as members of groups that have been the focus of recent research (Chalmers, 2012; George, 2011; Howard, 2014; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013; Smith, 2013).

Participant Journals

Each participant was asked to respond to six researcher-created journal prompts. The goal of using these journal prompts was to provide an emotionally safe place for the participants to tell their stories and express their thoughts without being required to discuss their ideas in person. For the purposes of this study, participant journals were considered personal documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The journal prompts were either hand-delivered or emailed and collected as the participants finished them. The completed journal prompts are included in Table 4 and Appendix J.

Table 4

Standardized Open-Ended Journal Prompts

Questions

1. Why do you stay when so many others leave?
 2. What gets you through the hard days? What keeps you going?
 3. How have you grown or changed since accepting your superintendency? How have your motivations and supports changed over time?
 4. How does the superintendency meet your needs?
 5. What do you wish someone had told you before you entered the superintendency?
 6. Create an image or write a quote, short story, poem, or any other writing that captures what you think of when you think about why you stay in the superintendency. Please explain why this image or quote is meaningful.
-

Questions 1 and 2 allowed the participants to discuss their motivation and persistence, while Question 3 asked about motivations and supports. Question 4 directly addressed needs fulfillment. Question 5 approached needs and persistence from a different angle, while Question 6 provided the participants with an alternative method of expressing their lived experiences. The question prompts for the participant journals were intentionally direct, but still open-ended to allow participants a chance to express their thoughts on potentially sensitive topics.

Data Analysis

An adapted version of the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, as described by Moustakas (1994), was used to analyze the data. Moustakas (1994) modified the analysis methods outlined by Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975) into the following 4 steps:

1. The researcher describes her own experience with the phenomenon.
2. Using the verbatim transcript from each co-researcher, the researcher follows these 7 substeps:
 - a. Evaluate each statement to determine its significance in the description of the experience of the phenomenon.
 - b. Record all significant statements.
 - c. Determine the invariant horizons by listing nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements.
 - d. Cluster these invariant horizons into themes.
 - e. Describe the textures of the experience by synthesizing the invariant horizons and themes.
 - f. Describe the structures of the experience by using imaginative variation.
 - g. Combine the textures and structures into one textural-structural description (essence).
3. Complete step 2 for each participant.
4. Combine the individual textural-structural descriptions into one “universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (p. 121).

This process was adapted by completing these steps only for the participants, not for the researcher herself.

Since data collection and data analysis are “part of the same process” (van Manen, 1990, p. 63), data analysis began very early in the data collection process when I conducted epoche to bracket out my preconceived notions about the participants, their roles, and the study constructs of persistence and Self-Determination Theory. I engaged in the epoche process by journaling about my thoughts, both positive and negative, about superintendents and the superintendency, public school administrators, persistence, people who have persisted, goals and goal-setting, autonomy, competence, relatedness, and support systems. I wrote about my assumptions and biases about these topics before I conducted any interviews, and then again after the interviews were complete. I revisited this bracketing again and added to it before conducting any data analysis to ensure that I was bringing a fresh mindset to the data analysis process as much as possible (Moustakas, 1994).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and as each transcript was completed, step 2 as outlined above was completed. Participant responses on the electronic questionnaires were also transcribed verbatim by the researcher and included in this data analysis, as were the participant responses to the journal prompts. After this analysis of the data from each individual participant was completed, step 4 as described above was completed to achieve a composite textural-structural description of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

There are a few points to consider within some of the steps of this process. Textural descriptions should be detailed, rich, and deep. Nothing, including “thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, situations” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47), is left out. The participants’ opinions and perceptions of their experiences are not fruitful data, but their detailed descriptions of their experiences are the end goal of the data collection process. Without these highly detailed descriptions, the

processes of Phenomenological Reduction and Imaginative Variation cannot take place. Another point to consider is that most of the steps laid out in step 2 of Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Stevick's (1971), Colaizzi's (1973), and Keen's (1975) analysis process are Phenomenological Reduction. These steps ensure that the philosophical underpinnings of transcendental phenomenology are reflected and accounted for in the data analysis process. For example, horizontalization takes place because all statements have the same meaning as they can represent different perspectives of the same object or phenomenon. No statement should be eliminated at this stage because to do so might result in an entire perspective of the phenomenon being eliminated and thus compromising the resultant essence of the phenomenon. Finally, although I used data from my participants to define the structural description of their experiences, I had to engage in Imaginative Variation in order to complete this step. In many ways, I used the noema-noesis relationship to explore the structural description, but the noesis was not as easy to identify based on direction statements from the participants as the textural or noematic portion. I referred to Moustakas' (1994) guidance as I searched for and described "the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others" in my efforts to detail the structural description (p. 99).

It should be noted that the single goal of the data analysis process is to craft a universal essence that describes the phenomenon. I used Husserl's description of essence, as described in Moustakas (1994), which "means that which common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is" (p. 43). All of my participants should be able to see their lived experiences in the final essence, if I analyzed the data appropriately.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is used to evaluate the quality of qualitative research (Patton, 2015).

Steps must be taken to ensure that a high-quality qualitative study reflects accepted standards and practices regarding trustworthiness, just as similar steps must be taken to ensure the reliability, validity, and objectivity of quantitative studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is achieved by establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility involves the believability of the conclusions reached in the study, while dependability involves the replicability of the study and its conclusions (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Transferability refers to the idea that the conclusions from the study can be generalized, within reason, to people not subject to the study, and confirmability describes the objectivity of the researcher and the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Credibility

In this research study, credibility was achieved through member checks, triangulation, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and recording of data for reference without interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Member checks occurred at multiple points throughout the study, including member checks of transcripts with each participant immediately after interview transcription, of themes and accompanying excerpts from transcripts, and of all final conclusions. Multiple methods and sources of data collection allowed for the triangulation of data. Data collected in different ways and from different sources was cross-referenced and compared continually throughout the data collection and analysis processes in order to ensure credibility throughout these stages. I engaged with my participants over an extended period of time to ensure that my conclusions were based in repeated exposure to the phenomenon and my participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Peer debriefing was achieved through work with my dissertation chair, research consultant, and committee members, as well as through the creation and maintenance of an audit trail and the sharing of the results of my epoche and field

memos. Finally, all of my data, including individual interviews, participant journals, and my field notes were recorded without interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This measure would allow anyone to analyze the same data without being affected by my interpretations or analysis. These steps were taken to ensure that all of my conclusions can be traced back to appropriately collected data and were free from anything that might affect the credibility of my conclusions.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability was achieved through consultation with my dissertation committee, the creation and maintenance of an audit trail, and the triangulation of multiple data methods and sources. Working closely with my dissertation committee ensured not only that I created and maintained a complete audit trail of my data collection and analysis, but that that trail was available for use by external observers. While I used multiple methods and sources for data collection in order to increase the credibility of my study, the dependability of my conclusions was also increased when the same themes and conclusions were evidenced in multiple data (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Confirmability was conveyed through my reflexive memos, triangulation, and an audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Any biases I have were revealed and bracketed out through my reflexive memoing. Triangulation of data sources and methods ensured that no conclusion rested on flawed or unsubstantiated data. The same audit trail used to establish credibility and dependability allowed for the connection of conclusions and results with specific data points.

Transferability

Transferability was achieved through the sampling technique and the use of rich, thick description (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Even though the participant pool was demographically limited, it reflected the current population of superintendents, which allowed for transferability.

The chances of the study conclusions resonating with readers who have experienced the same phenomenon as the study participants were increased by using a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2015). My use of rich, thick descriptions of the participants' lived experiences also enhanced the transferability of the study conclusions

Ethical Considerations

Provisions were made throughout the study to ensure all participants and data deriving from their experiences were protected and used in an ethical manner (Creswell, 2013). Approval for the research study from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board and signed informed consent documents from each participant were obtained before any data collection instruments were distributed or any data were collected. All participants, their school districts, and their communities were given pseudonyms and the utmost care in descriptions was taken to protect the participants' confidentiality. Participants were fully informed of the purposes and procedures of the study, the benefits and costs to them, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. No participant was pressured into consenting to participate. All hard-copy data was secured in locked cabinets and digital data were protected with passwords for the duration of the study and will remain under these protections until three years, at which time all raw data will be erased and disposed, per IRB guidelines (Liberty University, 2018). All participants were asked to review the transcripts of the interviews they participated in and they were allowed to make any changes, including providing clarification, rephrasing any comments, and deleting any comments. Themes and the final conclusions of the data analysis were shared with the participants for their review and input.

Summary

Chapter Three delineated the procedures for finding and securing participants, collecting data, and analyzing data to arrive at trustworthy conclusions. The nature of qualitative research informed every aspect of the research study and allowed for a clear and accurate description of the lived experiences of long-term superintendents in Virginia. The emergent design of the study ensured that the experiences of the participants speak for themselves and that all conclusions rest solely on the data as presented by the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study, the purpose of which was to describe the lived experiences of persistent superintendents in Virginia in light of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The central research question was: *What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?* There were four subquestions, as listed below:

Subquestion 1: How does maintaining the superintendency meet the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?

Subquestion 2: How do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency describe their sources of motivation?

Subquestion 3: What supports do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency cite as valuable?

Subquestion 4: What goals do persistent superintendents set, why do they set them, and how do they pursue them?

Data to answer the research questions were collected through a qualitative electronic questionnaire, an interview, and participant journal responses. Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Stevick's (1971), Colaizzi's (1973), and Keen's (1975) data analysis process was used to analyze the data and determine themes and answers to the research questions. In order to situate the findings resulting from this data analysis in the lived experiences of the participants, the chapter opens with a group portrait of all of the participants, followed by individual portraits

of each participant. Theme development is described next, as are the three main themes of the study: They Choose, They are Chosen, They Have a Core Purpose. The research questions are answered at the end of this chapter.

Participants

Potential participants for this study were identified via a criterion sampling procedure (Creswell, 2013) to select a purposive sample (Patton, 2015). All participants met the criteria of being current public school superintendents in Virginia who had served at least 5 consecutive years in their current superintendency. Ten participants volunteered and completed all of the data collection methods, including a qualitative electronic questionnaire about their goals, an interview, and several journal responses to prompts about their motivation and supports.

Group Portrait

As a result of the criteria used to solicit the potential participants, there are some natural similarities among those who agreed to participate. All of the study participants hold doctoral degrees, are married, have at least one child, and held at least one administrative or supervisory position before ascending to the superintendency. All participants have careers in public education that span a minimum of 20 years and a maximum of 40 years. All participants have been married for at least 10 years, most for at least 20 years. Four participants have not had their children living with them for any portion of their current superintendency, while the remaining 6 have had minor children living in their homes for at least part of their current superintendency. For all but 2 of the participants, their current superintendency is their first superintendency. Further details on the previous superintendencies of the remaining 2 participants will not be provided in order to maintain their confidentiality. Participants were encouraged to choose their own pseudonyms, so the last initial of two participants (John J. and John R.) is used to

differentiate between their self-selected names in Table 5 and throughout the final chapters.

Table 5. Participant Overview.

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Years in Current Role	Interview Format
Charlotte	Female	Caucasian	40-49	8	Virtual
Clark	Male	Caucasian	50-59	6	Virtual/Phone
Crosby	Male	Caucasian	60-69	8	Virtual/Phone
John J.	Male	Caucasian	40-49	6	Virtual
John R.	Male	Caucasian	40-49	9	Face-to-face
Monroe	Male	Caucasian	40-49	6	Face-to-face
Prince	Male	Caucasian	60-69	13	Face-to-face
Ricky	Male	African American	50-59	7	Face-to-face
Steven	Male	Caucasian	40-49	12	Face-to-face
Wilson	Male	Caucasian	60-69	11	Face-to-face

Just as the district characteristics were described in general terms, some participant characteristics must also be described in somewhat general terms to protect confidentiality. For example, the ages of the participants are reported in Table 5 as bands of 10 years because in some cases, a specific age combined with other participant and district characteristics could reveal the true identity of the participant. Gender and race are specifically highlighted in the literature base, so these characteristics were left in their specific form, but the other generalizing precautions described were taken to avoid revealing the true identities of the female and African American participants.

Individual Portraits

Much of the trustworthiness of transcendental phenomenological studies depends on the use of rich, thick descriptions of co-researchers and their comments (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To that end, individual portraits of each study participant are provided below, including selected comments that elucidate their character and provide insight into who they are as real people.

Although confidentiality is maintained throughout these portraits, the level of detail is such that the essence of the phenomenon of persistence in the superintendency should begin to become apparent, thus setting the stage for theme development and research question results.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a woman who is very comfortable in her own skin and she enjoys her life just as it is. She knows exactly who she is, what she wants in her job and her life, and what drives her to go to work every day. Charlotte described herself as “a little control freak” who doesn’t “like anyone telling me what to do” and she repeated this forthright, self-deprecating description several times during our interview. She feels a distinct connection to her family, referring to personal traits she shares with her grandfather and lessons she learned from her parents while growing up in rural Virginia. Charlotte is frank about her deep love for the specific kids she’s built relationships with over the years as sustaining her in her superintendency and she firmly believes she could not be happy as the superintendent of any other district because of those relationships with children.

Clark

Clark was more self-deprecating than most of the other participants, conveying an almost mystified sense of awe about his work and the opportunities his work affords him. Clark does not take himself too seriously, but he does take his job very seriously. He holds to a philosophy that has persisted no matter what his job title is: “I’ve figured out a lot about myself over the years and what I’ve learned about myself is that I stay true to my original goal and that was to just help others and do my very best every day.” He also refers to the work ethic he was taught as a child and how that ethic affects how he pours himself into his superintendency, even to the point of his

school board insisting that he take better care of himself instead of working too hard. Even as he navigates the demands of the superintendency, Clark speaks of being at peace in his job and really learning to enjoy his life and work as he gets older.

Crosby

Crosby maintains his high energy level with daily workouts and by surrounding himself with people he respects and admires. A consummate storyteller, Crosby offered repeatedly to make more time to speak with me, as it was obvious that he could tell many stories of how proud he is of his students, teachers, and staff members. He takes great pride in his close connections with many of the students in his small district and treasures the chance to be a part of their lives for many years. Crosby is keenly aware of the sacrifices he and his family made to get him to this superintendency and he does not take those sacrifices lightly. He has intentionally woven the superintendency into every aspect of his life, from working out at the high school to increasing opportunities to interact socially with his students and other community members. Due to his age, Crosby knows that his time in the superintendency is somewhat limited, but he has barely begun to think about post-retirement life because he is having far too much fun as the superintendent of his district.

John J.

John J. knows exactly who he is and what he is doing with his life, including in his superintendency. He was reluctant to participate in this study until he found out that I had overestimated the time commitment, but once he agreed to join the study, he quickly and thoroughly completed all of the data collection methods with enthusiasm. He even enjoyed the interview, cracking jokes about himself and laughing easily. In many ways, John J.'s journey to

the superintendency is characterized by a series of times when he envisioned himself assuming leadership roles to make improvements that he first noticed when in more junior roles. This work is beginning to be recognized as some of the most innovative work currently taking place in Virginia, so John J.'s decisions are paying off for him and his district. He knows his district is unique: "We're very focused on student-centered learning. We're not just focused on passing a state test, so I think that's what makes us unique." John J. has worked very hard to create a cohesive culture that encourages thoughtful risk-taking and he models these connections through his work in the community, within schools, and on social media.

John R.

It became clear as we talked that John had spent time thinking about his superintendency before we met, as his answers indicated a familiarity with regular self-reflection, a desire to improve, and a noticeable lack of ego. John tries to walk humbly in his life and although he admits that he has made mistakes in his superintendency, he has worked hard to ensure that he proves worthy of the role with which he has been entrusted. John conveys a sense of genuine contentment about his life, as he readily spent hours talking about his life, his experiences, his faith in God, and his reflections. He steadfastly believes that the Lord is directing his life well, so he is doing his absolute best to thoroughly enjoy the ride while fulfilling his responsibilities.

Monroe

Monroe began our interview speaking quietly and slowly, but soon it became impossible for him to express himself fully without using his hands. He emphasized his points by audibly touching the table, sometimes knocking on the table or lightly tapping on the table to match the cadence of his comments. As one of the participants who has been in his superintendency for the

shortest period of time, Monroe exudes a sense of eagerness and responsibility, as if he's been entrusted with a monumental task that he does not take lightly. He wore a full suit, jacket included, for the duration of our interview, but his tie had colorful children's handprints all over it, which speaks to his sense of duty that is enhanced by his obvious enjoyment of his work. Although Monroe's quiet voice tone and polite eye contact give the first impression that he is reserved, once the initial conversational pleasantries were over, he couldn't help but let his adoration of children, his deep love for his teachers and staff, and his respect for his community come through in his frequent smile, his glittering eyes, and his constantly moving hands. It was as if once he started talking about his feelings about his work, he couldn't fully express his joy without using his body, which speaks to his formal training as a theater teacher and to the strength of his emotions about his work.

Prince

As the long-standing superintendent of one of the largest school districts in Virginia, Prince could give the impression of an over-packed schedule and a frenetic work pace. Instead Prince was candid and eager to share the lessons he's learned in his many years in public education. His gregarious personality was evident throughout the interview, as was his penchant for describing his childhood and life experiences as a storyteller, weaving anecdotes and jokes throughout his comments. He knows exactly why he is in the role of superintendent and he strongly believes that everything he does is for the good of his students and teachers, but his primary reason for his life's work is the children he serves. Although his job is high-profile and full of stress and politics, Prince is also just a guy who eats pizza and binge watches news shows late at night to wind down from the day's events.

Ricky

Ricky is the same guy who used to come into the office on the weekends so he could work while his teacher wife planned her lessons in the next room, but now goes to his daughter's cheerleading competitions because he's learned how to balance his life better. His superintendency has not been without its challenges and Ricky speaks with sadness about some recent struggles. He also speaks with the voice of experience as he recounts the lessons he's learned and how he adjusted his leadership approach in response to those struggles. Ricky is keenly aware of how rare he is as an African American superintendent who has been in one district for over 5 years, but he is able to crack jokes and speak with wisdom borne from experience when he talks about his life and his work. He has also been in his current district for many years before he ascended to the superintendency, so his love for his community and his deep desire to do well by his stakeholders permeate his comments and his thinking.

Steven

Steven is an amateur historian of his community and he can speak to the overlap between history, the changing needs of his community, and his work within the school district. Steven knows the history of his community not because he is a history buff, but because he loves his community and feels that he needs to know its history in order to serve that community well. His intelligence and willingness to examine his practices come through in his stories about his family, what he has learned as a superintendent, and his desires for the students in his district. Steven's deep sense of satisfaction with his life and his work is so firmly entrenched that he had no qualms about leaving his office door open while he spoke openly and with candor about his thoughts and experiences. He is a superintendent who speaks honestly about his district and thus, he has nothing to hide.

Wilson

Wilson is too busy looking after his teachers and students to engage in any activities he does not see as valuable. He works for a school board that is well-known for the high education level and professionalism of its members, and Wilson's knowledge base, quick decision-making, and thorough understanding of systems thinking make him well-matched for such a board. He fell in love with his community when seeking his current superintendency and that love comes through whenever he talks about his teachers and students. Wilson's love for his work has sacrificial overtones, as he admits that "it truly is lonely at the top sometimes", a consequence of needing to keep potential friends at arm's length to avoid the perception of impropriety or actual attempts at manipulation. Even though by all measures he is one of the most successful superintendents in Virginia, Wilson says he feels "incompetent every day", a feeling that perhaps feeds his expectation for excellence in himself. Although Wilson knows his work benefits many, many people, he is always thinking of how he can improve for the good of the organization and taking steps to make those improvements a reality.

Results

The three themes that resulted from the data analysis rest on the foundation of the group and individual participant portraits. These themes and the answers to the research questions provide the essence of the phenomenon of persistence in the lives of these participants.

Theme Development

In many ways, theme development is synonymous with phenomenological data analysis because the purpose of this analysis is to craft an essence of the phenomenon that encompasses the textural and structural descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants with the

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The themes were the result of this analysis process and they described the essence of the participants' experiences. To accomplish this goal of crafting the essence of the phenomenon of persistence in the public school superintendency, each verbatim transcript was read repeatedly and significant statements were coded in ATLAS.ti. Statements were deemed significant if they described what the participants experienced and how they lived out those experiences, including "thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, situations" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). At this point, all significant statements were given equal weight to ensure no key component of the essence was dismissed or overlooked. All significant statements were then horizontalized in order to determine the invariant horizons of the participants' experiences through nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements. These invariant horizons were then repeatedly clustered and refined through phenomenological reduction until themes of what the participants experienced (the noema, or textural description) and how they experienced the phenomenon (the noesis, or structural description) emerged (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation was employed to ensure the noesis of the participants' experiences was as descriptive and accurate as possible. Finally, the themes were compared to each participant's data again and only themes that were common to all participants remained at the end of this process of eidetic reduction (Moustakas, 1994). The remaining textural-structural descriptions contained in the themes revealed an essence of the phenomenon, or one "universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). This essence is presented through the following three themes, They Choose, They are Chosen, and They Have a Core Purpose, as well as the answers to the research questions, which are presented at the end of this chapter.

Theme One: They Choose

The first theme that emerged from the data to describe what and how the participants

experienced the phenomenon of persistence in the superintendency was they choose the superintendency. Merriam-Webster (2018) defines choice as the opportunity or power to choose between two or more possibilities. Every participant faced choices repeatedly during the time leading up to their current superintendencies and ever since, and every time they were faced with a choice, they chose the superintendency. There are two facets of this theme pertaining to the timing of their choices: they chose to become superintendents and they continue to choose to remain in their current superintendencies.

They chose to become superintendents. There were a series of choices that all of the participants made over the course of their careers along the way to their current positions. Before any of them could choose to become superintendents, they had to begin their journey by choosing to leave the classroom. Some participants felt that moving out of the classroom into a leadership position was something they were drawn to and interested in, such as John R: “A couple years later, I really started feeling that maybe I could contribute more to the schools and to the profession in a leadership role.” Crosby knew he wanted to go into administration, but chose to get his doctorate before he sought administrative jobs: “But I returned to the university after spending a year back in [another location] to say, ‘You know what? The master’s degree was wonderful, but I think I want to go back and finish my doctorate.’ So back down we went.” Other participants were more ambivalent about leaving the classroom, yet still chose to do so. When he explained how he left the classroom for the internship that led to his first administrative position, Prince described a conversation he had with his superintendent at the time:

He asked me if I was going to apply for that [position] because he knew me and I said, “You know, no, I hadn’t thought about it.” So then I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll apply.” Well anyway, I got the job.

Even considering that he was speaking many years after this event in his life, Prince's attitude toward being asked by his superintendent at the time to be the first teacher in his district to apply for an internship that had previously only been held by assistant superintendents seemed humble, but not like something he was overly excited about before he began the job. Other participants reluctantly moved out of the classroom, including Charlotte, who said, "This preK coordinator position came open in this other county and I really wasn't much interested in it, but a person at central office said, 'You really should apply for this.' So I did and I got it." Charlotte, Prince, and Clark all stated that if left to their own devices, they would still be in the classroom instead of the superintendent's office, which runs counter to the decisions they actually made that led them to their current positions. Still, it should be noted that not everyone was eager to leave the classroom and their students, regardless of the choices they made.

Once they moved into administration, each participant had a different journey to the superintendent's office, but they all chose to move up the ladder through administrative jobs with increasing responsibility. As Ricky put it, "As you start in leadership roles, you're always saying, 'What would it be like to be the next level?'" Wilson echoed this question when he was contemplating whether or not to get his doctorate: "It was just the next challenge that came along. I've always been very competitive and once I do something for a while, I wonder, 'Is there more I can do?'" Sometimes the answer to this question was unexpected, such as when Charlotte changed districts to accept a principalship:

It just happened that year that the principalship came open there and I never thought I'd leave my old district, my whole family lives there, so it was a very bizarre, impulsive thing I did and I became the principal of the elementary school.

This move landed her in the district in which she holds her current superintendency, so although

she may not have realized the implications of her choice at the time she made it, that choice was a steppingstone that led to the superintendency in which she eventually persisted. John J. also could not have known the full implications of his choices at the time he made them since he felt that he was taking risks:

I kinda laugh because it seemed like I couldn't keep a job because I kept getting promotions. And I suppose good things were happening. I like to say some of it happened by luck or by chance, but I took a lot of risks. And they paid off.

Not everyone took risks along the way to the superintendency. Some participants made a conscious decision to pursue the superintendency after they had left the classroom and were advancing up the administrative ladder. Monroe was in a district-level administrative position when he chose to begin his doctoral program: "I started when I had made up my mind that I wanted to be a superintendent." John R.'s choice to consider the superintendency is also connected to his doctoral program:

I don't think I really thought about superintendent until I applied for the doctoral program... and so I did put superintendent out there at that point, not necessarily as a goal that if I didn't achieve would be devastating. But I certainly wanted that door to be opened at some point, if it could be.

These decisions, to obtain a doctorate and to pursue the superintendency, were connected in time for Monroe and John R., but considering that holding a doctorate while employed as an administrator in a public school division in Virginia is one of the options to become eligible for a division superintendent license in Virginia, all of the participants were presented with the possibility of the superintendency once they obtained their doctoral degrees (Virginia Administrative Code § 8VAC20-22-600). Wilson recalled that once he started his doctoral

program, “I had a number of my professors who said, ‘You’re wasting your time. You need to be a superintendent.’” At some point, all of the participants chose to get their doctoral degree and to continue to accept administrative positions that drew them closer to the superintendent’s office.

In some cases, participants held administrative jobs that they loved, but they still chose to move beyond those jobs to the superintendency. As Ricky explains, “Then I got into what I consider my dream job, which was coordinator of elementary education. It was a dream job, but I only did it one year because opportunity knocked again and I became assistant superintendent.” Even though he was happy in his dream job, Ricky chose to answer when opportunity knocked and moved into the position that eventually led to his current superintendency. Crosby experienced a similar reaction when he agreed to move out of the high school principalship and into the associate superintendency:

Well, of course you have to apply, but basically the gentleman that hired me to be principal at the high school wanted me to move into central office. So I thought that over, agreed, “Sure, why not?” It’s another step in the evolution. But quite honestly, I was completely happy to be a high school principal. And in that first year being an associate superintendent in central office, I was not really in a good place. I missed the kids tremendously. I missed the action of being in a high school, the Friday night football games and just the buzz of being in school... You kind of miss that when you get into central office.

Just as some participants said they would be happy to remain in the classroom, some would have been just as happy to remain in other administrative positions. Yet, they all still chose to apply for and accept their superintendencies.

For some participants, the choice to move into the superintendency was not a

monumental one that required a lot of thought. Wilson's professors in his doctoral program were not the only ones encouraging him to apply for a superintendency: "The last three superintendents I worked for just kept saying, 'You're really spinning your wheels here, you're wasting your talents. You really should become a superintendent yourself.'" He received so much encouragement from others that applying for the superintendency seemed like a natural choice on his part. Although he explained it differently, John J. felt the same. When asked why he chose to become a superintendent, he responded, "Because I'm crazy. [laughter] No, I think it's just, it's one of those natural progressions when you're working in a school division." The abundance of district administrators who never pursue the superintendency would argue against his point, but for him, the choice to become a superintendent was a natural extension of the choices he had made since leaving the classroom.

Other participants chose to pursue the superintendency out of fear of what might happen if they did not do so. When her old superintendent retired, Charlotte decided to apply for his job. Charlotte explained her choice when she said, "And I was so used to doing what I wanted to do that I didn't want another superintendent coming in here and telling me what to do and that's the God's honest truth!" On some level she was afraid that she would not be allowed to carry out her responsibilities as she had for years, so she chose to apply for her current superintendency. Like Charlotte, Ricky decided to pursue the superintendency in his district after his old superintendent retired:

And having been in Richee, it was a natural next step for me to apply for that superintendency. I say that it was natural, but it was really tough for me to make that decision because I wasn't sure if I was ready for it, ready in the sense of knowing the time it would take. But I decided that if I didn't take that position or didn't apply for that

position, I in turn would be working for someone that may take us in a different direction. Because being in charge of curriculum and instruction, the superintendent really allowed me to go towards a particular vision that we agreed upon. And so the idea of someone coming and maybe deciding something differently... I said, "Gosh, I better take advantage of this. There's no telling when the opportunity comes again."

Ricky knew that not applying for the superintendency himself could lead to undesired changes in his job. But he also recognized that the position he was prepared for was unlikely to become available again anytime soon, so even though he was somewhat conflicted about the time requirements of the superintendency, he elected to pursue it regardless. Prince was also faced with a situation in which he had to decide what he was willing to tolerate. While serving in a district-level leadership position in human resources, Prince found that he was being required to fire people who did not fit in with the new superintendent's vision for the district. Prince said that after several months of these forced firings,

It became obvious to me that at some point that would be the end of my career. Plus, I just couldn't stand the new superintendent and what he was doing. I felt like we were just going backwards at rocket speed. So that motivated me to get my first superintendency.

Instead of changing his actions to appease his new superintendent in the hopes of avoiding being fired, or choosing to wait until this unpleasant situation changed in some other way, Prince chose to leave a high-level administrative job to apply for a superintendency. Charlotte, Ricky, and Prince all described situations that drove them to take a chance on becoming a superintendent, but out of a fear of the possibility of unknown consequences outside of their control.

Other participants also described taking a chance by applying for a superintendency, but their actions did not stem from any negative surrounding circumstances. Since Crosby had been

serving as an associate superintendent for several years when his superintendent retired, he said, “I thought, ‘Here’s yet another opportunity. Why not?’ So I threw my hat in the ring and I was fortunate enough to be selected superintendent.” Clark was faced with a similar opportunity when a superintendency in another district became available:

My current superintendent at the time said, “You know what? You’re just a wonderful leader and good to people and I think you’re ready. I don’t want to tell you this because...’. I was one of her right hand people. “But I think you need to know that you’re ready for the superintendency and I think you could do a whole lot of good for a whole lot of people.” So I went home and I talked to my wife about it. And it was kind of laughable to me that I would do that. My wife said, “Why don’t you go ahead and give it a shot?” and I said, “Ok.” I threw my name out there and actually I came here and I interviewed and I got the job. And I was like, “Uh oh, now what?” [laughter]

In some ways, Clark did not completely believe his superintendent’s opinion of him and part of him did not think he would actually be selected for a superintendency. Since he has remained in this superintendency for over 5 years, he obviously figured out what to do after he got the job, but that does not change the fact that he took a risk in applying for it. Steven also took a risk when his school board chairperson visited the school where he was principal after his superintendent at the time announced his retirement:

I thought the school board chairman was going to visit all the principals to let them know that our current superintendent was retiring and that there’d be a change. But it turned out that apparently she was just coming to see me to let me know that they held me in really high regard and this happened sooner than they wanted, but hey, who knows, the next superintendent might be an older person who’s only here for a few years, probably still is

a good future for me in Starling City. And I don't know what prompted me to say it, but I'm glad I did. I said, "I thank you for coming to visit and sharing that with me, but I intend to apply and I'd like to be considered regardless." And she's like, "Oh, ok." And I applied and I was considered.

In fact, he got the job. He moved directly from the principalship to the superintendency and has remained there ever since. His risk paid off. Sometimes just applying for the job is risky, as John R. explains, "I always tell people it has to be a God thing because that was the only job I applied for as a superintendent." He made the choice to apply only for this superintendency, just as Charlotte, Ricky, and Steven did. Yet their risks resulted from conscious choices they made, just as all the superintendents in this study made deliberate choices to accept their superintendencies.

Even though every participant chose to become a superintendent, it should be noted that not all of them intended to end up in the superintendent's office when they began in education. When Clark said, "I did not really mean to get here", he was not telling a joke. He sincerely did not intend for his career to take him on this path, even though he recognized that he chose each step on the path. As Monroe also explained, "The last thing I thought I would do one day would be to be a superintendent." He grew up with one of his parents occupying the role of public school superintendent, so he had an intimate look at the superintendency before he entered public education. He knew what he did not want to do when he first became a teacher, but Monroe still chose to accept the superintendency when the choice presented itself. Charlotte described her choice in a similar fashion:

I love the kids here because I've been their elementary principal that I just applied for the superintendency and I got it. So that's how I didn't really aspire to be a superintendent. It just happened. So that's not the way it usually works, but that's the way it worked for me.

If someone would've said years ago, "You're going to a superintendent", I would say, "Heck, no!"

Charlotte made the decision to become a superintendent when the right opportunity became available, but she was very clear in explaining that she never intended to end up in this job. But like all of the participants, she could look back over the course of her career and map out the choices she made that led her to the superintendency.

They continued to choose their superintendencies. The second facet of the first theme to emerge from the data was they continued to choose their superintendencies while they occupied the position. They choose to stay even in spite of the stress and loneliness that are inherent in the superintendency. The participants choose to stay in their current superintendencies because they made a commitment, their work is not finished yet, and they love their jobs and communities.

Stress. Different superintendents described their stress in different ways, but Prince provided a common insight when he said, "There's a level of stress with the superintendency that no one can understand 'til you're in it." The stress level is so far beyond what non-superintendents can fathom that only once immersed in the job can superintendents fully comprehend that experience. Wilson elaborated on the sources of stress in the superintendency:

There is a lot of stress related to the job. There's a lot of stress, especially during budget, which runs pretty much from October through May. There's times of stress, like the parent conference this morning or personnel issues. The worry of decisions you make and how it impacts people creates a lot of stress.

Wilson cited specific examples of stress-inducing experiences common in the superintendency,

but he also pointed to the self-reflection and possibly second-guessing that follow decision-making as being stressful. Monroe continued in this vein when he stated, “I would like to find the superintendent who doesn’t go through days or seasons of going, ‘How much longer do I want to tolerate or endure this?’ And ‘this’ can be many things.” He directly connected stressful situations and unpleasant experiences in the superintendency with the idea of persistence. In the poem he wrote in response to one of the journal prompts, Clark gave several examples of situations that might prompt a superintendent to ask questions like those cited by Monroe:

“Legislators overreaching, / Making laws, / Know nothing ‘bout teaching, / Teachers are upset, / We need raises, / Money is tight, / That’s what the case is!” As one of the longest-serving superintendents in Virginia, Prince spoke from experience when he said:

Because when you’re a leader and when you’re in these positions, you’re expected to lead with confidence. People don’t follow somebody who looks like they’re anxiety-riddle or worried about everything or scared and on and on and on. But that is the life, you lead a life of anxiety and fear and you don’t know what’s coming next and there are so many variables that you cannot control and people are always going to be dissatisfied and things are going to happen. They’re gonna blow up in the press and the social media.

Prince elaborated on the points made by Wilson, Monroe, and Clark when he described how superintendents are expected to lead in spite of their own feelings of stress and worry. Not only will someone be displeased with the superintendent’s actions, but sometimes they take their displeasure to the media, both social and traditional, which can exacerbate the superintendent’s stress level.

Some participants described this public disapproval of their work in terms that ranged from benign to hostile. Wilson described this disapproval when he said, “There are some people

who get upset at times. There's some people who are negative about the school system, especially with us being as diverse as we are." Monroe elaborated on this point when he explained:

Working with boards, who represent citizens and constituencies, many of which may either have contempt for or aren't really interested in supporting what we're doing in public education. And that's not the majority of people, but as we know, minorities can feel like majorities for people in my role.

Wilson and Monroe's frustration with these experiences with unsupportive community members and others came to a head in John J.'s comments:

But seeing that people aren't more supportive of the school system is frustrating. So during the time that I've been here, sometimes I feel like, "Am I not saying it right? Am I not saying it enough? Am I not...?" And then you feel like, "Maybe I need to be more aggressive with the way that I present it." But then what happens when you create friction or you create animosity, then you get nothing.

No superintendent always gets exactly what he or she works for, even though their work is noble and in the best interests of children and the community. But these persistent superintendents have learned that although they must be cognizant of public disapproval, they cannot allow that disapproval to dissuade them from their work, regardless of how stressful that situation may be for the specific superintendent. Other superintendents have been met with outright hostility in their work, as explained by Monroe:

Given that there's always small factions of folks out there that their mission is your undoing. Even if they don't admit it. It is...No matter how well you lead, there will be

people who will rise as your enemy inexplicably.

Prince received similar advice from one of his mentors: “He said, ‘In the superintendency, everybody and their dog is gonna be fighting you on any change you wanna make.’ Well, you don’t really understand that until you’re in it.” He elaborated further:

People who are out to get you, people who are out to block everything you ever tried to do because that’s what happens in the superintendency. A lot of people say, “Well, that shouldn’t be a problem.” Oh yeah! Almost any change is a problem to some group of people.

These superintendents described very stressful situations that are specific to the superintendency. These stressors are endemic to the job, thus they are unavoidable and they must be dealt with appropriately if the superintendents wish to remain employed. However, these superintendents also made it very clear that they choose to continue in their jobs, even though they must deal with disapproval and hostility.

Another stressor cited by some participants is the public nature of their roles. Everyone in a given community knows who the school district superintendent is, as Monroe said, “I just think that when you’re a leader, you always feel like you’re a bit on parade.” Some participants, like John R. “have grown more comfortable being the visible face of the school division”. Some participants even embrace it, as John J. explained, “I feel that this role is a powerful one and everyone who serves in this role has to know that they are a role model for others”. But John J.’s comments about his wife and her response to the public nature of her husband’s job were important to consider:

She loves the community and that’s worked out very well. She’s not crazy about the

limelight. She doesn't particularly like to go with me to a lot of events. She didn't sign up for this. So she's not crazy about it because in her mind, she's more of an introvert in that way. She doesn't like to be out in the public eye all the time. I signed up for this, she didn't.

John J. drew a very clear distinction between his responsibilities in terms of the public nature of his job and his wife's responsibilities, but he hasn't lost sight of how his job affects her. Some participants might do the grocery shopping, like Prince, while others leave that public task to their spouses, like Monroe. The participants with minor children in their homes while they served as superintendents often went to their children's school and sporting events, such as Prince, John R., Steven, and Ricky, but they would often go in jeans instead of full suits at the request of their children. All of these participants were aware of how their families also came under public scrutiny as a result of their role as superintendent, so they had to weigh the impact of the limelight on their families whenever they chose to stay in their jobs.

Loneliness. Just as the public spotlight is inherent in the superintendency, so is loneliness. This sense of loneliness stems from two factors: even in the education field, not many people can relate to the experiences of a public school superintendent, which can feel isolating, but also there are limits to the number and depth of friendships held by superintendents. As Clark explained when he recounted a conversation he had with his board attorney, sometimes there just isn't anyone for the superintendent to talk to:

And I told him, I said, "I got nobody. This is such a confidential matter, I got nobody I can talk to, except for my attorney." Because of my district, I don't have an assistant superintendent. I've got directors, but I don't have that assistant superintendent. You know what I'm saying? So I can talk to my board members, but there's a point when

you're dealing with a situation, you've got to vet it out and figure it out before you introduce it to your board, right? So I'm in that no man's land where I'm by myself.

No man's lands are lonely by definition and given the fact that there is only one superintendent in any public school district, there is a limit to the number of people who can understand and relate to the experiences of superintendents. John J. explained how and why some superintendents feel lonely, even when the exact people who can relate to them attempt to form connections with them:

I would just say it can be a very lonely job if you don't make connections with your colleagues outside. I'm the regional chair for this area. I make an attempt to reach out to other superintendents that I don't hear from to see how they're doing, to check on them. No one did that for me, but what I've learned is you kind of get buried quickly in this job. And you also don't want to call your colleagues all the time because you feel like it makes you look like you don't know what you're doing, because you're afraid your colleagues will say, "Oh, that's a dumb question."... So I think that some of the superintendents who are not successful try to go it alone, don't have a mentor or a colleague that checks in with them. I think that's the problem. The other thing is you're embarrassed that it's not going well. So you kind of withdraw, don't want to talk about it. And I've had some of my colleagues that things start going south and when I reach out to them, they don't respond. The other thing that I think is unfortunate is when they're not successful, it's plastered all over the newspaper. It's not like, "Whoops! I messed up and no one knows about it." [laughter] It's in the newspaper.

In John J.'s opinion, sometimes loneliness can stem from a fear of looking incompetent in the eyes of one's colleagues, especially if they've served in their roles for more years. But John J.

spoke about how embarrassment and loneliness can jeopardize a superintendent's longevity by driving the superintendent into hiding, which only exacerbates the feeling of loneliness. Monroe described how instead of hiding, he has sought out support from his colleagues to alleviate his feelings of loneliness:

When people say being a superintendent's lonely, it gets real lonely when you go, "Has anyone else ever had this happen?! And when they did, what did they do?" And usually I can find someone that, "What did you do?". And we may not do the same thing, but it's comforting to know that we've had to navigate through some of the same types of challenges.

Sometimes just knowing that there are other superintendents who are willing to provide support, advice, and encouragement can mitigate feelings of loneliness in sitting superintendents. Many of the participants cited the need for increased contact with fellow superintendents because their friendships changed dramatically as a result of their superintendencies.

Ricky was blunt when he said, "as far as friends, I don't have any", but the other participants echoed his comment. Some superintendents, like John R., drew very clear lines of separation between themselves and their closest work colleagues:

From a leadership and management standpoint, I really shouldn't have friends in the school system. Not our principals, not even my senior team because I evaluate them and I also shouldn't be friends with these board members. Now I can be friendly and cordial and ask and get to know them and, of course, you can grow close to people. But I guess what I'm saying is that I don't socialize with any of these folks outside of work unless it is an official work function.

Not all of the participants lived by such a clear line between themselves and their work colleagues in terms of friendship, but they still recounted challenges with these relationships. Crosby reflected that, “in terms of social life outside of school, I would say it’s almost nonexistent. If I think of whatever we do outside of school, if there’s any kind of gathering, it often involves people here at work”. Prince also described his friendships as being “mostly work-related”, but he also described limits to those friendships that were necessary as a result of his job:

I have to be very careful because anything I say...And the other thing is everybody likes to talk about education, so there’s almost no relief from it. So even if you do go to a function that’s non-work-related, people will just gravitate and have a tendency, once they get talking, to talk about anything that’s bothering them or not working well or that sort of thing.

Prince had found that on the rare occasions when he had conversations with potential friends that he would meet at social gatherings, they did not seem to be interested in him as a person, but only as the superintendent. Wilson elaborated on this balance that must be struck between having friendly relationships and doing his job well:

The friendship piece has been difficult. I find that when you’re in a position like this that people who you are friends with or friendly with often want special consideration. Or they don’t want their child disciplined or they want a special schedule for their children and I’m sure that’s just natural human behavior, but due to that, I have very few close friends. The closest that I am to people are people that work within the division at the administrative level. And it truly is lonely at the top sometimes. Because you just have to be very, very, very careful because I don’t want to put myself in a position where I’m

asked to do something I can't do. And I've lost friends for being a superintendent and I can cite one specific story. My wife and I were in church one time, sitting by the aisle and the pastor was giving his sermon. And a man walked up the aisle and squatted down to me during the sermon and wanted to talk to me about something that happened with his child because I went to that church. And he thought he deserved that. So friendships are difficult. The friends I do have don't have kids in school. So that kind of brings up a knot to my throat 'cuz that's tough.

Wilson described in poignant detail how difficult it can be to have friends while also persisting in the superintendency. Like Prince, he could never be quite sure if potential friends wanted to connect with him because of him as a person or because of what special treatment they could get by being friends with the district superintendent. Wilson acknowledged that he had to give up friends in order to do his job well and to stay in his job, which makes his description of having people attempt to manipulate him even more disturbing.

Wilson was not alone in citing how he had lost friends as a result of his job. John J. described interactions he had with friends in which the relationship did not survive past a certain point:

I've lost many friends. I've had friends call me and ask me to hire them for a job and I would say, "You're not qualified for this job". And they were like, "We're not friends anymore". [laughter] Well, you shouldn't apply for the job when you're not qualified. But it takes a lot of strength to be able to say those things to your friends, acquaintances, and I don't have a problem saying that. That's probably why my friendships aren't so great. [laughter]

Even though he was poking fun at himself, John J. was very serious when he described how he

did not compromise the integrity of his work to preserve friendships. Steven echoed this loss when he explained some advice he had received: “A former mayor once said, ‘The more decisions I make the fewer friends I have.’” Like the other superintendents who gave up friends, he repeatedly chose doing his job well over keeping friends. As bleak as this picture may seem, it is important to point out how frequently the participants cited fellow superintendents as supportive friends, even when they described their loneliness and stress. As John J. described, “a lot of my friendships now tend to be more colleagues who are superintendents”. While other participants mentioned their more personal connections with other superintendents, Clark explained just how meaningful those relationships were to him:

We’re having a superintendents’ conference next week. It’ll start on Sunday and it’ll end on Wednesday and I’m so looking forward to it because I’ll reconnect with superintendents whom I’ve become friends with over the years. I do have a few friends over the years and they may have moved from district to district, but they’re still superintendents that I reconnect with, so I can’t wait. And we go out to dinner together and it’s great to hear their problems ‘cuz then you realize you’re not the only gal or guy in the world with those issues.

Clark’s joy at being able to reconnect with fellow superintendents who had become friends belied just how important those connections were to him, especially in terms of assuaging feelings of loneliness. Even though the stress and loneliness of the superintendency are considerable, there were reasons cited by the participants for staying, including meaningful friendships with each other.

Made a commitment. The participants chose to remain in their superintendencies in spite of certain negative elements, so a clear understanding of the positive elements that influence their

choice is necessary to fully describe their experiences with persistence in the superintendency. One reason for this choice cited by the participants is that they made a commitment that is fulfilled by their staying in the superintendency. Charlotte said, “I stay because I have made a commitment to our children and community,” and Monroe said, “I stay because of the commitment I have made to the school division, board, and community”. These almost identical responses succinctly expressed the kind of commitment the participants made, but some of them elaborated further. Monroe went on to explain why he stayed through multiple contracts: “So when the school board on behalf of the community says, ‘We want to continue to have you lead this school division,’ I have to do that or I won’t or I shouldn’t sign the contract”. John J. echoed this comment when he said, “I don’t think [leaving is] fair to this community and to the people that work here, so I feel like if you make a commitment, you need to stick it out for a period of time”. John R.’s description of how his sense of commitment resulting from being appointed superintendent after less central office experience than other candidates manifested as a sense of loyalty was especially pointed:

Initially, I know just from reading the paper and stuff like that they took some grief over the appointment. And I guess I feel some loyalty for that. I feel like, sure, they appointed me when maybe on paper I was not checking all the boxes that they thought I shoulda had. So is it right or fair or appropriate for me to basically let them give me the training opportunity and then parlay that for a higher salary? And I don’t think they would’ve begrudged me if I had done that. I mean, it’s hard to say to anybody advancing your career or taking a higher salary is something that anybody kind of wouldn’t do. But I still feel that loyalty.

None of the participants expressed this sense of commitment in a negative way, but only as a

positive reason for why they chose to stay in their superintendencies.

Not yet finished with the work. Another reason for staying was that the participants did not feel that they had accomplished all that they wanted or needed to in their current superintendencies. Charlotte said, “I still have things to accomplish here”, while Ricky said, “I do feel like work just isn’t done yet”. John J. was a little more lighthearted in his comment that, “the other thing is there’s more work to do. Once you think you’ve tackled the big stuff, there’s more big stuff”. Crosby connected his persistence with the work and his actual presence in the superintendency when he said, “I stay because I feel a sense of purpose, that there is a great deal of meaningful work to be accomplished, and I need to be here to help make it happen”. Not only did a superintendent need to be at the helm in Crosby’s district, but he believed that he was the specific superintendent that needed to stay in that role for the sake of the work being done. As one of the longest-serving superintendents in Virginia, Wilson knew that there was an expiration date on his superintendency, but as he expressed it, “the day I come to the realization there’s nothing more that I can do or nothing more I want to do or I don’t have the motivation to be here anymore is the day that I can retire”. He still believed that there was more that he could do, that the contributions he had to make to the work of the school district had not been exhausted yet. Again, the participants cited not having finished their work only as a positive reason to stay in their superintendencies.

Love my job and community. The participants also gave their love for their jobs and communities as a reason they continually chose to stay in their superintendencies. Charlotte was quite blunt in her explanation of why she stays in her small rural superintendency:

I don’t know if I could be a superintendent anywhere else. I don’t think I would enjoy it because I have the relationships here. I think that’s what keeps me here. But I have no

desire to go off to be a superintendent anywhere else. None whatsoever.

Charlotte made similar comments several times throughout the interview and in her journal responses, so this sentiment was not an off-hand comment, but an expression of her true feelings about her community and the role she plays in it. Steven expressed similar feelings about his superintendency in his community: “In reality, there is nowhere else I’d rather be... This is a really special place. And it’s a very unique place. There are other places like it, I’ve been to a few, but there aren’t many like it.” Wilson expressed his appreciation for the diversity of his community and school district:

But we talk about American being a melting pot. I look at it more as a vegetable soup that each person, each different ethnic group adds something to the flavor. So it’s just a really neat community to live in.

It is important to note that Wilson said “live in”, not “work in”. His community was his home, not just his workplace, and that sentiment carried meaning for him, as well as other participants. Monroe raised this point in his comments:

I had some history with this school division. I had a connection, so when you feel like a part of you is here, it’s sort of like being at home. So there’s a part of that here. The other part is I really think that the community itself and the people who work in the school division are some of the finest people that I’ve worked with.

Monroe was at home in his community, but he also loved his job and the people with whom he was able to work. Not only did John R. value the people in his job, but he also wanted them to value him, which they did. This respect for him contributed to his desire to stay in his current superintendency:

I don't want to be somewhere where my skills are not valued and appreciated. And so it isn't even so much like I want them to like me. It's more like I want them to respect me and value me. And that's not just they: the school board, but they: the staff, the community. I think I have a pretty good sense of that and I haven't seen those signs going.

John R.'s need for validation and appreciation were met in his superintendency, so he had reason to stay, which contributed to his choice to stay. Wilson also recognized that his needs were met through his superintendency:

I enjoy getting up and coming to work every day. I have always been one who looks to the next challenge. Believe me, every day is a challenge. I can honestly say that I have never been bored! I need to be challenged. I need to have something different every day. I need to feel that what I am doing is of value to others. This job meets those needs.

Wilson loved his community and he loved his job for the work he was able to do every day, much like the rest of the participants in this study. Every day they made the choice to come to work, even though they experienced significant reasons to give up or make a change.

Theme Two: They are Chosen

The second theme that emerged from the data to describe the experiences of the persistent superintendents was they were chosen. In a way, this theme was somewhat obvious because all of the participants were current superintendents who had persisted in their positions for longer than 5 years, so not only had they been offered the job of superintendent, but they each had been offered at least one more contract after their initial appointments. Thus, all of the participants had been chosen multiple times to become and remain superintendents. However, there was more

detail to how and when the participants were chosen. Again, there is an element of time to this theme. Each of the participants was chosen repeatedly leading up to their current superintendencies. They also continued to be chosen by their school boards and their communities, as evidenced by their continued employment as district superintendents.

They were chosen to become superintendents. Some of the participants were the recipients of special consideration from others even before they began teaching, a necessary step along the path to the superintendency. Prince began teaching in a school that was filled with master teachers who had been teaching for years and he was “the first person to be hired as a new teacher right out of college”, a particular honor that reveals how others thought of him even at that early stage in his career. Monroe described how others would seek him out and choose him for his leadership: “Because I would have people coming down the hall in my dorm, and saying, helping them with issues. And I kept saying, ‘I don’t wanna do this.’” Even though he was a reluctant leader, people chose him to help them solve their problems. Even at that young age, there was something about him that led others to choose him.

This choosing by others continued as the participants moved into the classroom. John J. recalled a conversation he had with his principal when he was still teaching:

I still remember being a fifth grade teacher and having my principal say to me, “You’re going to be a principal one day, right?” And I said, “No! Why would you say that?” So right away she saw the potential there.

Even though he found the idea of leadership to be somewhat ludicrous when it was suggested to him, John J. ultimately did pursue educational leadership after his principal singled him out with her encouragement. Before John R. switched from his original career to become a classroom teacher, he was encouraged to push himself as he entered public education, but from his old

employer who was not in the education field:

He said, "Please continue with your education. You've got too much potential to not get your masters, maybe even your doctorate." He said, "And after a while, after you've taught for a while, think about doing something with leadership too, 'cuz you've got a lot of leadership gifts."

John R. hadn't even started teaching yet, but he was chosen to receive this feedback and encouragement from his boss. Others, like Ricky, remembered being told to keep moving up: "When I was a teacher, I had strong encouragement to become a principal". Wilson received similar feedback:

I did some work as an assistant athletic director and athletic director at a high school where I was and the principal and assistant principal kept telling me, "You need to get into administration", "Need to get into administration", "Need to get into administration". And so they finally talked me into starting my master's degree work.

Wilson's entre into administration soon followed the completion of this degree program, but his comments were very similar to some of Charlotte's, who said, "But I guess a few people saw within me leadership and they kept bothering me, 'Well, now you've got this masters, you need to apply for this job and that job.'" Crosby's dissertation advisor singled him out by offering him tangible help in terms of connections that ultimately led to his first principalship. In many ways, Clark's comments about his journey out of the classroom and up the administrative ladder reflect the experiences of the other participants:

People have always come and said, "Hey, you might want to give this a look-see." So I've gotta just be very humble in how the people who I work for have taken an interest in

my life to help me be better. And that goes back to my principal when I was a teacher, saying to me, “Hey, you really need to go get your administrative degree, I think you’d be a phenomenal principal because...” And I was like, “Right, whatever”. But he said, “Because of the way you care for people”. And I said, “Ok, ok, I’ll go try this, but it probably won’t work out”. And then when I was working as an assistant principal, my mentor, she was wonderful. She did the same thing. And so every position I have held, I’ve had that special someone in leadership tell me, “You really need to go to the next level”.

Clark and other participants received unsolicited encouragement, support, and feedback that led them into administration. There was something unique or worthy about them that led their leaders to choose to give them this feedback and support, without which some of the participants, such as Charlotte, Clark, and Prince, may never have left the classroom.

The participants were also chosen to receive encouragement and support to move beyond building-level administration and into district administration and eventually the superintendent’s office. When she was a principal, Charlotte’s superintendent told her, “I really need you in central office”, so she moved to central office into the last position she held before becoming superintendent in the same district. When John R. moved out of building-level administration and came to central office, he was given a newly created job: “They said to me, ‘You’re defining this position as you go’. And I know that’s not for everybody, but I just thought that was the coolest thing!”. Perhaps it was this enthusiasm that led one of his mentors, a former superintendent, to also provide intensive support when John R. proposed applying for the superintendency that he currently holds:

But when this job came open and I went to him and told him I was thinking that maybe

this was my next step, I was actually expecting him to say, “Well, you haven’t been a principal yet, so maybe ought to have you do that for a few years”. Or maybe, “You ought to wait until you become deputy superintendent or something that was a little bit higher, but not a superintendent” because I’d seen all these career paths all over these things. But without hesitating, he said, “Absolutely”. And he goes, “And you’re gonna get it”. I’m like, “Yeah right, like I’m gonna get it. Whatever!” But he actually spent a considerable amount of time coaching me and advising me through the selection process and the interview process, which was nothing like anything I’d been through because it was an outside search firm. And it was just very different. It was very helpful to be able to go to somebody who had been through and walked through it, who was kind of in my corner.

Not only did John R.’s mentor give him a proverbial pat on the back, but he chose to invest considerable time and effort into helping John R. achieve his goal. Most participants did not cite such extensive support in their pursuit of the superintendency, but they still were the beneficiaries of help from others. John J.’s superintendent sent him to an aspiring superintendents conference when he was a director because, as John J. said, “He knew that I had that skill set and I was successful in that job” to the point that he wanted to push John J. to the next level. Ricky was very content in his dream job of coordinator when his superintendent told him, “You can reach so many more” by becoming an assistant superintendent. Wilson’s superintendent told him he needed to get his doctorate and when he was in his doctoral program, his professors told him, “You’re wasting your time, you need to be a superintendent”. Even though Steven had only been a principal and had never worked in central office, he was selected for his current superintendency. Each of the participants was chosen to receive jobs, support,

feedback, encouragement, and other forms of help all along the way to their superintendencies.

They continue to be chosen to remain superintendents. All of the participants were still at the helm of their districts at the time of this research study, so not only had they been initially appointed, but they continued to be chosen to stay in their jobs. Two main groups chose them repeatedly: their school boards and their communities.

School boards. All of the school boards of these participants are elected, so the longer a superintendent has been in office, the greater the chances are that there has been turnover on the school board with each election. Charlotte has experienced almost no turnover on her school board during her tenure, Ricky, Wilson, Monroe, John J., and Clark have had some turnover, and Crosby, Steven, Prince, and John R. have had a significant amount of turnover. As Crosby said, “There’re never been problems with the ones that hired you. It’s always the ones that come in afterwards”, which definitely resonated with several of the participants who have dealt with changes in their school boards. Of course, since all of the participants were still employed by those school boards, any problems that arose did not cost them their jobs, but in some cases, it did require action on the superintendent’s part. For example, Prince described his thoughts on his changing board:

So I’ve worked very hard to try to build relationships with these new folks over the last year and a half. And with some I have had some success, which is why I’m still here...

But I’m smart enough to also know that I serve at the pleasure of the board and I’m also aware that the range of survivability for a superintendency nowadays is about 2.6 to 3.4 years, so being in year __ is a privilege and an honor.

Prince knows how good he has it in terms of his relationship with his board, even though he has to work extremely hard to maintain that goodness as the years go on. His efforts seem to pay off

every year he keeps his job. Monroe described his experiences with his school board as being the result of their working relationship: “And that has really been with three different school boards because anytime you change one member, you have a new school board. And so that wouldn’t’ve happened if there hadn’t been a positive working relationship”. He knew that he would not have been offered multiple contracts after changes in his school board if they were not satisfied with his performance. Interestingly, John R. pointed out that being offered multiple contracts does not always imply that the entire school board has chosen him:

I’ve never had unanimous approval of a contract. I’m on my [number] contract here and there’s always been at least one or two dissenters. That has never, from my perspective, never tarnished the working relationship and the majority of those folks have always been cordial and respectful and there haven’t been any public belittling of me or anything like that. Well, one of them did it before he got on the board, but that was as a political candidate, so I don’t even consider that real. [laughter]

John R. made the conscious decision to work well with his entire school board, even those who may have not treated him well in some circumstances. It seems that this choice was respected and valued because he maintained his employment through several changes. It should be noted that even though he has always had school board members who had problems with his leadership, he has been offered multiple contracts throughout the changes in board membership. He was still chosen repeatedly by his board, just like the rest of the participants.

This choice on the part of the school board was not always rife with tension or stress for some participants. Steven declared, “I’ve got just the best school board in Virginia. And it’s completely turned over. None of them were on the board when I was hired”. His board has

changed completely and not only have they still employed him, but he openly expressed his high regard for them. Ricky expressed similar sentiments:

So I feel very fortunate that I have a very strong, supportive relationship with my board.

It's nothing for them to email, text, or call to say, "What about this?", "What do you think?", or "Why is this happening?" and I try to be as responsive as possible. And I think that the key is mutual respect and being responsive.

Even after a season of bad publicity that resulted in the community being extremely unhappy with the school board and to a lesser degree, Ricky, his school board still supported him in tangible ways that were meaningful to Ricky. They asked for his input and his opinion and he felt that they valued him, as well as chose to continue working with him. Clark also felt valued by his school board when they encouraged him to take better care of himself: "They said they'd never seen somebody work as hard as I have. Really, that's not high praise... I think what's been really helpful for my longevity is my board saw that I needed to take care of myself". Clark wasn't alone in this kind of board support, as Steven benefited from it as well:

It's actually my board who, six, seven years ago, said, "Steven, you need to empower yourself to make better decisions". I asked, "What does that mean?" and they're like, "Steven, you work horrendous hours, so if you were to go to the gym, you'd be taking time from your family to do it. What you need to do is two, three days a week, take two hours for lunch and go to the gym". And I'm like, "But everybody else gets an hour for lunch". And their answer was, "But those people aren't working 70 and 80 hours a week".

Even though Steven's board had changed over the years, they have been very supportive of him, even to the point of insisting that he take better care of his health. They invested in him and his

family, which seems only to have increased his desire to stay with them and reiterated the strength of their decision to keep him as superintendent. Regardless of how the school board expressed support for each participant, it is clear that all of the participants had been chosen repeatedly by their school boards.

Communities. The other entity that has chosen the participants repeatedly is the communities in which they live and work. As Charlotte plainly said, “If you don’t have a good relationship with the community, they’ll pretty much run you out of the division, especially if you have elected school boards”. Monroe and Steven both used the word “supportive” when they described their communities, and Wilson went into a little more detail:

It is welcoming. It’s a very supportive community. There are some people who get upset at times, there’s some people who are negative about the school system, especially with us being as diverse as we are. But for the most part, I’ve met very few people who don’t pat us on the back and say, “You guys are doing a great job!”

Not only did members of Wilson’s community think highly of his work, but they chose to let him know that when they saw him in public. Ricky also experienced support and encouragement from his community:

As I either go to the gym or the supermarket, I hear people say, “I know it’s rough right now, but you have a lot of people behind you”. Or, “We think the school division does a good job”. The most vocal are unfortunately sometimes the most negative, but I know that’s part of the game. As I shared with someone, they said, “I’m praying for you” and I appreciate that.

Even during a time when some members of the community were crucifying the school district in the media, other community members took the time to reach out and support their

superintendent. Prince and John R. spoke about the high level of involvement their districts enjoyed from the business community and other employers in their communities, oftentimes taking time out of their work to work with the school division and its students. Even the somewhat insular rural communities that some of the participants live in embraced their superintendents, as John J. found out: “I think that they saw that children are my primary focus and I think they’ve accepted me, which again I was a little surprised that they did so quickly because they’re not big on outsiders [laughter]”. Although superintendents in Virginia are required to live in their districts, some superintendents noted that their communities appreciated that they chose to move into the district of their superintendency. Charlotte pointed out: “It’s really important that I lived here”. Other than the few participants who were promoted to superintendent from a position within their current districts, all of them moved into the communities they currently serve. Perhaps by showing the community that they chose the community for their own home, the participants made it a little bit easier for the communities to choose to support and encourage their superintendents.

Theme Three: They Have a Core Purpose

The third theme that emerged from the data to describe the participants’ experiences was they have a core purpose that is fulfilled by remaining in the superintendency. This core purpose guides their work and contributes to their persistence. This core purpose comes from their love for children and their coworkers, and is evidenced in their work, such as making a positive difference for children and leaving a legacy for children that will persist beyond them.

Sense of calling or purpose. All of the participants cited a sense of calling or purpose in some fashion as a primary reason for their work as superintendents and for their persistence in that role. As Crosby succinctly said about the superintendency, “It gives me a sense of purpose

and provides meaning in my life”. Crosby’s work gives him personal meaning. Charlotte agreed with that sentiment: “So I feel like when I’m teaching and providing opportunities that I am serving my purpose, so it’s internally rewarding”. Fulfilling one’s purpose is meaningful and rewarding, which can lead to a greater sense of commitment to one’s original goals. Ricky connected the superintendency to his original purpose for entering the education field when he explained why he chose to focus on providing equitable opportunities for all students: “I chose these general goals for myself to serve as a reminder as to why I chose education to begin with”. Decades after starting his first teaching job, Ricky’s sense of purpose is still driving his work. Wilson also expressed a purposeful drive in his work: “As far as what keeps me coming back, the answer is easy. It is the people. The people I work with, the people I run into at the grocery store”. His relationships give him a sense of purpose and reason to come to work. John J. took this sense of purpose a step further when he said, “I have never seen this as just a job. I have always felt that this is a calling”. Whereas John J. felt called, Steven felt led: “I believe I’m serving where I was led to serve and doing what I was led to do”.

Some of the participants elaborated on these points. Charlotte explained the connection between her sense of purpose and her persistence:

And if you’re a superintendent to keep moving up to bigger school systems, make more money, you’re not going to be staying where you are. So I think what is your purpose as a superintendent and like I said, my purpose here is not really to be a superintendent. It’s to do what’s right for the kids who are in Claremont.

For Charlotte, the superintendency is the means to the end of helping children, a purpose that drives and supports her work. Monroe tried to avoid his sense of calling because of his childhood experiences:

The last thing that I thought I would do one day would be to be a superintendent because I'd seen it from the childhood perspective and it just didn't look that exciting or compelling. At that age, you wanna be an athlete or a movie star or you wanna be a fireman or something of that sort, and so I was not initially drawn to that. But as I became older, I felt drawn to leadership. I felt called to leadership, almost like something that became inescapable.

Monroe's sense of calling directly informed his decision to become and remain a superintendent. Crosby described a series of questions that he asks himself that were echoed in the comments of other participants:

But once you get up on the ledge and once you look around, you have to ask yourself, "Am I making a difference? Is this meaningful work? Is this purposeful? Are these people that I work with good people?" And if all the indicators are headed in the positive direction, I persist. And I'm going to continue to persist because it's all I know. Without this I can't do much. I cannot change a flat tire and I sure as heck can't fix a computer, so it's education or nothing.

Crosby's comments connect his sense of purpose and meaning not only to his work as a superintendent, but to his identity as a person. It can be hard to leave something that gives one's life meaning if there is not something equally meaningful to replace it or another way to fulfill that sense of calling or purpose. In many ways, most if not all of the participants answer Crosby's questions the same way he does, perhaps for the same reasons that he gives for his persistence.

Some participants specified that the origin of and support for their sense of calling or purpose was their faith in God. Clark spoke of his "strong faith base" and how the "love of God"

helps him persist during rough times at work. Monroe spoke about the power of prayer as a support: “But I don’t think that I’d be here if a lot of people didn’t pray for me every day”. He counts on prayer from others to help him persist as he fulfills his calling. Steven relies on his first priority, his faith in God, to drive him in his work: “But for me, this heroic profession is about service to others. I know that I’m called to serve, but I’m also supposed to be obedient about where to serve. Ultimately, it isn’t about me”. Not only did Steven feel called to the superintendency, but he firmly believed that he was called to the superintendency in his district. Both of these beliefs directly support his persistence in that role. John R.’s comments echoed this idea: “Part of my belief system is that if you feel like God has asked you to do something or driven you somewhere, you better have some pretty compelling reason to move in another direction”. He has no intention of leaving until he feels that God has called him to do so. He continued:

I know that I have been blessed with certain gifts, and it would be sinful for me to withhold those gifts from serving others. It is risky professionally to be a superintendent, but it is more risky to ignore God’s calling in your life.

Again, like the other superintendents who spoke about their faith, John R. clearly stated the influence of his belief in God as a driving force not only in his general calling to serve in the education field, but also to serve specifically in his current district. For participants who have a strong faith base, their religious beliefs exert a tremendous amount of influence over their actions and their persistence. However, all of the participants, regardless of their religious beliefs, held to a steadfast belief in a sense of purpose in their work.

Love for children. Some participants stated the purpose for their work without actually using the words “purpose” or “calling”. In those cases, and even for those who did use those

words, love for children was an oft-cited reason for their persistence. Prince was very clear when he said, “But don’t forget why you’re in it! It has to be about the kids”. Monroe expressed a similar sentiment when he said, “It’s the students! It’s kids, it’s why I’m really here”. Clark continued this feeling in his poem: “At the end of the day, / It’s the sweet glory of the children, / When they trust you / And say, ‘I’ve got it / Did you see me? / I can do this, / Will you help me?’” For Clark, witnessing the successes of children and walking alongside them as they learn and grow has been the central goal of his work and a consistent motivation. Steven was very clear when he connected a love for children to the work of his district:

Our organizational chart, we turned it upside down to just always remind ourselves that the classroom is the uppermost, most important unit. That’s where lives are changed, children’s lives are changed by great teachers. Everything else exists to support that. So the rest of us are there to hold that up, lift it high, and make it better.

The entire district, including himself, works to support the classroom for the benefit of the students.

In some cases, participants spoke about how their love for children contributed to their persistence. Ricky talked about how he would get through the tough days: “Keeping your eyes on the prize of doing what’s best for children and reminding folks that’s what we’re here for”. Love for children helps Ricky cope with the hard times. Charlotte was blunt when she said, “If I didn’t know the kids, I don’t think I could put up with some of the nonsense you put up with”. Her persistence in her role and in her district might look different if she didn’t have a deep love for the children she knows. Crosby expressed a similar feeling: “So I get these kids in kindergarten, I can follow them all the way through, and shake their hand at graduation. So that’s very gratifying, that appeals to me”. Both Charlotte and Crosby have stayed in their small school

districts because of the close relationships they are able to have with children. Monroe's love for children led him to add a student advisory committee to his direct advisories: "Today I met with my student group that I meet with each quarter and engage them in student interest and getting feedback from students on their experience in school, and use that to share with others". Not only does he spend time with them, but he takes their advice into consideration. Wilson also loves watching his love for children bear fruit in their endeavors:

When our kids are recognized, like we have this group called the [name of student singing group] that if you could hear them, they would just... chills... When I see them perform or one of our athletic teams performs well or our robotics team performs well. All of these student successes help Wilson feel a sense of competence and joy in the results of his work.

Steven also keeps children close to him. Next to his desk in his office, there is a peach-colored bucket filled with multicolored paper flowers on long green metal stems. A photograph of a child's face is on each flower and there are at least 3 dozen of these flowers. He has a bouquet of children's smiling faces next to his desk at all times, which only highlights how children are a source of joy and beauty in his life. A comment from Prince exemplifies the enduring nature of love for children in the lives of these superintendents:

People who become superintendents, they all started the same, most of them started the same way. They're nice people who were good teachers, loved kids, therefore the kids liked them, therefore the parents liked them. Then you get these jobs that years later you're making these, I mean, I'm overseeing a [dollar amount] budget and... But I'm still that same person.

These persistent superintendents have a fundamental foundation in their love for children and this foundation serves them throughout their careers.

Love for coworkers. Another facet of the sense of purpose possessed by some of these persistent superintendents is a love for their coworkers. As John R. said, “It’s just, I work with great people!” Crosby agreed with that sentiment and even connected it to his persistence: “I really enjoy working with them. I like and trust them immensely... I could not remain in this position without them nor could we accomplish all that we have been able to do without a shared sense of purpose”. Monroe echoed these comments when he said, “In a larger school division, what keeps me in is the good people that I’ve put in place through the board’s support”. John J. made a very similar comment: “This is the future leadership of this school division. And now that I’ve got this dream team in place, I want to work with them!” Having the leeway to employ people who are good at their jobs and then having the chance to stick around long enough to work with them supports the persistence for superintendents like John J. and Monroe. Other superintendents, like Ricky, have seen their persistence in remaining in the same superintendency result in strong relationships with some of their coworkers:

But being here now over 20 years, I have teachers that are encouraging during the struggles we went through in the spring. It was nothing to get a card from a teacher saying, “Hang in there”, “We’ve got your back”, or “We support you”, “You’re doing a fine job”, “I know it’s discouraging”.

Ricky was clear in stating that encouragement like this from coworkers contributed to his reasons for persisting in his superintendency. Wilson echoed this comment when he remarked on how although many things have changed over the course of his career, he is still motivated by his relationships with folks like his coworkers:

I enjoy working with my principals, I have a good relationship with my senior staff.

Being in a small division, I try to learn as much about the individual staff members as I can so that I can build relationships... A lot has changed – No Child Left Behind, SOLs, difficult budgets – but the people remain the same.

Working with great people contributes to the joy felt by these superintendents as they persist in their roles.

Making a positive difference. Another way the participants' sense of calling or purpose manifested in their work is in their focus on making a positive difference in the lives of children, teachers, and community members. Crosby encapsulated this focus when he said, "You persist because you believe that you're making a difference... I believe that I'm part of something special here, that we're making some good things happen". He can be part of something beyond himself and see the difference his leadership makes in the lives of children. He continued by saying:

But what an opportunity! What an opportunity! At this stage in my life, to still get up and come in, to work out in the gym, and then to make a difference in this little small school division in this region.

Not only does he get to make a difference in the lives of others, but he gets some of his needs met too by staying active and valuable to the people in his community. John R. revealed that his motivation to make a difference has not changed over time: "I don't believe my motivations have fundamentally changed over the past 8 years. It has always been about trying to make a more positive difference for children". John J. echoed this idea when he said, "Being able to impact change and being able to see the change that has happened as a result of my being here is

motivation”. Wilson used an analogy to describe how making a positive difference affects his persistence:

But there’s also something that happens every day that makes you feel so good about what you do that you come back the next day. It’s kind of like playing golf. I might hit 90 bad shots, but I hit that one shot that makes me feel like a pro and I want to go play tomorrow.

Working so hard to make a positive difference motivates these superintendents and convinces them to keep working.

Some participants went into more detail by describing that they have worked to make a positive difference in terms of equity and opportunities for children. One of Clark’s explicit goals was “to increase student educational and experiential opportunities”. He worked in his district to increase the number of post-secondary opportunities for students, including providing access to Career and Technical Education certifications and associate’s degree programs. Some of Crosby’s professional goals stemmed from “an issue of equity and equality” and Monroe had a goal of “providing equitable access to resources for all students”. John J. can directly connect his work as a superintendent with an improvement of student access:

I see our students getting educational opportunities that they would not have if certain structures were not put in place several years ago and if I had not asked students for their ideas on how to improve their educational experience.

He has seen the fruit of his labors, especially his work with students and observing them benefit from his leadership helps him persist in his role. Charlotte also spoke of increasing the equity of access for her students:

The reward that comes from helping children, especially in our area, there's a lot of poverty, so providing the access and opportunities for students who wouldn't normally have those opportunities. So I think that's what keeps me in education is providing for those who don't usually have those opportunities.

Charlotte is very cognizant of how the impact of her work on students helps motivate her to maintain her superintendency.

Other superintendents also spoke of how the superintendency provides them with opportunities to make a positive difference not only within their district, but beyond to the state level of public education. As Monroe explained:

I think I'm afforded the opportunity to, as a superintendent in a large school division, to have a voice of advocacy for our public schools throughout the Commonwealth. Whether it's the ear of legislators as one of 132 superintendents that gets to meet with the state superintendent and gets to make recommendations. I'm part of many advisories that give me the opportunity not only to understand but to voice my concerns or my questions on issues.

But it's not just the superintendents of large school districts who persist because of the greater sphere of influence afforded to them by their roles. Clark, a small school district superintendent, also enjoys a level of advocacy that motivates him:

As far as professional needs, it also opens up the door for being a leader not only within my current school district but within other districts because I'm able to become a voice for other communities. For example, we're putting together a coalition for small, rural school divisions so that our voice can be heard at the General Assembly rather than ignored. We feel like there's, of course, more voice in numbers than all of us

superintendents of small school divisions going and speaking for ourselves, so I'm very proud of that.

Persisting in his role allows Clark to be part of work that benefits not only his district, but other districts like his and even the state legislature. Steven has seen his school district have "pretty good influence at the state level in recent years" and John R. has noticed that "now those folks call me and ask my input and serving on panels and it used to be like I had to almost beg to get appointments with these folks". By these folks, he meant "elected officials, state senators, delegates, people in the governor's office", so he definitely enjoys the greater access to these powerful people that his role gives him. These superintendents can observe the impact their leadership has not only within their district boundaries, but across the state and beyond.

Leaving a legacy. The final aspect of the participants' core purpose that emerged from the data was the idea of leaving a legacy. Although he was reluctant to use the phrase, Crosby described how the increasing the capacity of his people and improving the work of his district feeds his core purpose:

I think all of us have a certain amount of desire to make a difference. To leave your mark, if you will. Some use the word legacy, I'm not big on legacy. But to leave your mark, to make a difference to leave a place in a little better shape than when you arrived. And I use the events, Kate, as an example to kind of segue into the superintendency. I can't speak for the others, but I'll certainly say when you get to 40 years under your belt, when you get to a certain point in your career and life, you say, "I want to leave this school division in a little better place than when I arrived".

Crosby had been describing a variety of community events that his team had implemented successfully and he was using those events as examples of how he had worked hard to improve

his team members' skills and to contribute to the lives of their students and the community.

Steven used similar words to describe his outlook: "I want the division to be better than I found it and to continue to become better even after I am gone". Charlotte also made a similar comment when she said, "I want to make sure when I leave here that I leave it better than I found it".

Considering that practically identical phrases were said by three different superintendents, it is remarkable how important this idea of leaving the district in a better place is to these participants.

Other participants echoed similar sentiments, although with more of an emphasis on building capacity that will extend beyond the superintendents' tenures. John J. explained his thoughts in more depth:

The other thing that's important is that you build capacity. You don't want it to be all about your vision. It needs to be about collective vision. That's what happens with leadership, the leaders leave, then they change direction every time someone leaves them. So my goal is to build capacity so that people here can continue great work regardless of who's in this chair. And hopefully one of those people can be in this chair and they don't leave.

He had been thinking about what will happen when he leaves and he was still focused on the good of the organization for the sake of the children. He had worked to create future leaders, not to push his agenda. Monroe had a similar outlook on his responsibility towards the school division:

I have people that I can delegate authority, that I can empower, that I can build up, so that the school division's capacity is there long after I'm gone. Which is as, if anything, is as important to me as the time I'm here, being able to look back and see that the school

division is thriving when I'm done. That will be a bigger test of how effective I was, or am, because if it isn't strong, then it'll fall apart.

Like Crosby, Monroe was not only building up leaders to replace him and carry out the work he started, but who will also keep the district doing well after he is gone. Steven has been so committed to this idea of leaving a legacy by building up leaders that he purposely trains more teachers and administrators than he could employ in his district:

Another superintendent said, "Steven, you're a fool. You don't have many vacancies, these people are going to leave you. You're cultivating more leaders than you'll even use. They're gonna leave!" And I hadn't even pondered it that way and asked, "Well, are they gonna go where children are? 'Cuz if that's where they're gonna go, that's fine. What's the problem?" And so we do purposely grow more leaders than we can use.

This attitude towards cultivating leaders who might leave the district that trained them is selfless and oriented towards improving the profession at large. Steven approached building capacity from a larger lens than just his own district. He viewed the building up of individuals who may take that training and go elsewhere as benefiting the profession overall and still benefiting children. As long as someone's children would benefit, Steven approved of leaving a legacy of building capacity in teachers and administrators. Crosby also spoke of watching people he had mentored and trained leave:

And they're looking to you and then when they go off and find jobs and they move up the line... to be able to write them that letter of recommendation, it's very gratifying and it makes you feel that you're doing good things.

Watching people he had mentored or taught leave the nest, so to speak, made Crosby feel good and kept him doing that work. Leaving a legacy of increased capacity in their districts was a manifestation of the core purpose of these persistent superintendents.

Research Question Responses

Central Question. What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency? Persistent superintendents describe their experience as their choice that fulfills their core purpose and for which they were chosen. They chose to leave the classroom and advance through the administrative ranks to become superintendents. They continue to choose to remain in the superintendency, in spite of stress and loneliness, because they made a commitment, they are not finished with their work, and they love their jobs and communities. They were chosen by their supervisors, university professors, and other mentors to receive special consideration and support as they advanced in their careers and they were ultimately selected to lead their current districts. They continue to be chosen to lead as superintendents by both their school boards and their communities. They have a core purpose that is evidenced in their love for children and their coworkers, as well as their desire to make a positive difference and leave a legacy that endures after they retire.

Subquestion One. How does maintaining the superintendency meet the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency? In order to answer this question fully, the definitions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are matched with the data that answer that portion of the central research question. According to Deci & Ryan (2002), “autonomy refers to being the perceived origin or source of one’s own behavior” (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Ryan & Connell, 1989). It is worth considering that “one can quite autonomously enact values and

behaviors that others have requested or forwarded, provided that one congruently endorses them” (Deci & Ryan, 2002). These definitions were not provided to the participants during data collection in order to allow their answers pertaining to autonomy to remain unbiased or otherwise influenced by the nuances of the word autonomy. Even so, the data revealed that although half of the participants described having little to no autonomy in their superintendencies, they endorsed and enacted values forwarded to them by their school boards and other stakeholder groups (Deci & Ryan, 2002), thus exemplifying the definition of autonomy contained in Self-Determination Theory.

Monroe described his thoughts on what he was willing to accept in terms of limits on his sense of autonomy in his role:

I knew that if I was going to accept the position, I needed to accept what I already knew about the limits to the autonomy that I would like. There’s another part of that. I really believe that... for me, the superintendency and working with the board is about developing another team. But it’s not a team that you control. It’s a team that you model for and you guide. But they’re elected official and you’re not. You ultimately are evaluated by them. So you straddle that line between trying to guide the board and not try to control them. There are times where I accept that we can’t move as quickly as we’d like to because the board needs to not only understand what we’re doing and why we’re doing it, but they need to buy into it.

Persistent superintendents recognize the limits on their autonomy even before they accept the job and they use their autonomy to guide a team that they never choose because limits on autonomy do not necessarily mean limits on influence. Other superintendents are more straightforward about the limits on their autonomy in their roles. Monroe continued his comments and bluntly

said, “I view the superintendency as not being a job that is synonymous with autonomy”. As Prince said, “It’s not really an autonomous job. If you think you can operate that way, you’re probably not going to last. It is just not an autonomous job”. John J. concurred when he said, “You really don’t have a lot of autonomy. I think that’s where you get in trouble”. Ricky was more descriptive in his comments:

Our veteran superintendent, she asked me my first year, “How do you like it?” I said, “I like it”. She said, “Yeah, you think you’re the boss, but you’re really not”. You have to realize that and that’s ok. It’s not like you’re making those decisions independently even though you can. You should feel comfortable when you have to because there are some that you have to make. It is a very collaborative process.

Persistent superintendents work within the boundaries of their autonomy and they find the most effective ways of collaborating and sharing decision-making as a way of increasing the likelihood of their decisions being supported by multiple stakeholder groups. As Wilson explained, “I guess I could exercise more autonomy by making all decisions, but I think that when I sit in a room with my entire administration, all of us together are smarter than me by myself”. When persistent superintendents spoke about their perceived lack of autonomy, they also described how they honored those limits and found ways to work well within those bounds, thus demonstrating how their need for autonomy is met through their superintendencies.

Some participants described how their superintendencies met their need for autonomy by including the element of trust in their view of autonomy. Crosby described the beginning of his superintendency: “Success breeds success. If you can get a couple wins, then you get more autonomy. If you screw things up really badly, you’re going to get the reins pulled in”. John R. described his first years in the superintendency in a similar way: “I would say after my first

couple of years, when I think I probably let a few board members influence me too much... I have felt an extremely high level of autonomy”. He learned the hard way how to exert himself in order to establish a level of autonomy that best met his needs. He had to learn how to trust his school board members while learning how to do his job well. John R. elaborated on the trust between him and school board, specifically around the issue of hiring staff:

They have rarely, if ever, questioned a hiring decision. On senior level people, even though I don’t need their permission technically, if they were uncomfortable with somebody for whatever reason, I would honor that and I wouldn’t want to put them in that position because that would just set up an unhealthy dynamic.

Although John R. felt that he had the autonomy to hire whoever he wanted, he chose to exercise that autonomy by fostering trust with his school board by including them in high profile hiring decisions. Clark described his board’s support of him in similar terms: “I stay because I’ve been fortunate to have a mostly supportive school board. I was given the autonomy to surround myself with my type of person in terms of leadership team and I think that builds sustainability over time”. Steven also described his board’s support of his hiring decisions:

Starling City School Board in my eleven years as superintendent has never told me who to hire or not hire. It is always, “Get us the absolute best people” and that means we have not hired friends of mine and spouses of friends of mine and friends of friends of board members. There are people who don’t talk to me because we didn’t hire their daughter, even though they’ve served in the school division forever. But we just have always been empowered to hire the best person at the time for the position.

Steven was willing to alienate people he knew personally in order to preserve the sense of trust that existed between him and his board because that trust directly affected his sense of autonomy

and support for his decisions. Charlotte was willing to learn to be more trusting of her staff as a result of the trust invested in her by her school board:

I do have autonomy. That's the good thing about the school board that I work for is they pretty much trust me. That's why I should trust other people. They trust me. They give me the autonomy to pretty much do things the way that I see fit.

Charlotte made a clear connection between autonomy and trust and she explained how those factors influenced her behavior and her choices. Overall, the superintendency allows the persistent participants to meet their need for autonomy either by directly providing them with plenty of autonomy or by giving them the opportunity to act in ways that validate the beliefs of the school board that they “congruently endorse” (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Deci and Ryan (2002) say “competence refers to feeling effective in one's ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one's capacities” (Deci, 1975; Harter, 1983; White, 1959). All of the participants expressed feeling effective in their current roles and agreed that their superintendencies provide them with opportunities to exhibit their capacities. Charlotte described how she used her skills with finding resources and forming connections beyond her district to provide her students with opportunities they might not otherwise have had. Prince described feeling effective as he led his district through several school openings, the integration of full-day kindergarten for all students, and increased graduation rates for all groups of students. Wilson talked about leading his district to maintain full accreditation for all schools, even through tough economic times, as well as participating in graduation every year and working with his board to provide increases in teacher compensation. Crosby also described graduation as a time when he felt effective as a superintendent, in addition to those times when he coached and supported staff members who

became leaders themselves. Ricky kept a running list of successful projects and improvements that resulted from his leadership. These participants articulated specific ways in which they felt effective, which contributed to their sense of competence in their roles. However other participants described a more general sense of competence. John J. elaborated on the connection between his actions, the success of his district, and his feelings about his job:

We have had great success as a school division based on several academic and other indicators. In addition, we have received many state and national awards. This is an indicator that we are working well as a team to meet the needs of the school division. Everyone likes to be a part of a winning team. I feel that this has led to job satisfaction for me and the board has shown their appreciation by extending my contract, providing positive feedback through the evaluation process, and giving me a salary adjustment when practical. All of these things make me feel appreciated as a superintendent.

Although he used the word “appreciated”, it is clear that John J. would not reap the benefits he described if his board did not see him as competent. Clark also used more general terms to describe what makes him feel competent:

I think being able to come up with solutions to make people’s lives better and figuring out those hard things that come across your desk, I think figuring those things out is a sense of feeling competent, that you contributed. For me, if I feel like I’ve contributed, I feel very competent.

The superintendency provided Clark with a way to effectively serve other people, which met his need for competence. Clark’s comments continued to expand on how his job meets his needs:

The superintendency certainly does fulfill my personal needs to where I feel like I need to

make a difference and help others and this really does meet that need. I've been able to see more and more impact on others through my leadership, so that's really helpful. It gives me a sense of belonging and a sense of accomplishment.

Clark directly connected his job with a fulfilled sense of not only competence, but also relatedness, another key component of Self-Determination Theory.

Not only do these participants feel a sense of efficacy and competence in their work, but those feelings are validated by their school boards and other stakeholder groups. Monroe pointed out that he feels competent because his contract has been renewed twice. Steven agreed when he said, "I think inherently if you're not doing a good job, you're not going to be doing it for eleven years". John J., John R., Clark, and Steven all described being approached by head-hunter firms and other school districts with offers of employment, which implies a feeling of competence on the part of outside observers as opposed to those living in their current school districts. Steven described getting notes of encouragement and gratitude from various people over the course of his career, including during his superintendency. John J. described how he receives encouraging feedback from unexpected sources:

I have a lot of people that come up to me that I don't even know that thank me for all that I do and all that we're doing in our school division. To me, that's powerful. I don't go around asking them for feedback. They come up to me. Some of them don't even live in Jupiter County!

John J. also explained that he hears similar comments from other superintendents in Virginia who have heard about his leadership and the resulting work in his district. This positive, unsolicited feedback contributed to John J.'s sense of competence in his role.

According to Deci & Ryan (2002), “relatedness refers to feeling connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by those others, to having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and with one’s community” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1979; Harlow, 1958; Ryan, 1995). Even though the friendships of most of the participants were negatively affected by their superintendencies, as described above, the connections most of them made with their coworkers, students, and other superintendents met their needs for relatedness as defined by Deci and Ryan (2002). Some participants, such as Monroe and Prince, who work in larger districts, work hard to maintain connections by visiting every school each year. To them, this is a gesture of caring that can remind them why they engage in the hard work of the superintendency, even though their direct connections with students may be more limited than those of superintendents in smaller districts. Crosby in particular had a very unique Friday ritual during which he waved goodbye to every student and teacher at dismissal. His district was so small that he could foster close connections with teachers and students. Charlotte also nurtured relationships with students and teachers by engaging in activities such as leading district-wide professional development during pre-service week, meeting with student panels at every school, and running the social media presence for the entire district. Steven prided himself on being part of the second interview for every teacher in his district, an action that he described as “gratifying and fulfilling”. John R., Prince, and Wilson described the high level of importance they placed on their relationships with other superintendents in the state. Through regional and state-level meetings over their years as superintendents, personal connections blossomed in a professional context and meaningful relationships were formed to the degree that the dissolution of those relationships upon retirement was already predicted to be unpleasant. One of John J.’s comments encapsulates how most of the participants described how their caring actions towards others pay

dividends for the superintendents:

You're in a role where you're constantly modeling caring for others and support for others and I think that's where you really take a lead role. Like when I attend funerals or wakes for staff members or students. When I go to homes of staff members when big things happen. I think that really sends a very strong message that you're the lead moral representation for the school division... I feel like we're a family.

Multiple participants described their districts like John J. did by using the word "family", including Wilson, Prince, Charlotte, and Crosby. Family implies a sense of mutual caring and belongingness, a deep sense of which most of the superintendents feel in their roles.

Some participants expressed ambivalence in terms of how well the superintendency met their need for relatedness. Although Wilson talked about making connections with other superintendents through their shared interest in education, as well as forming professional connections within the community, he also lamented the lack of friendship he had while a superintendent. Even though he cited the people he works with and for as his primary reason for remaining in the superintendency, he also commented on how the lack of friendships "brings up a knot to my throat". Ricky also commented on the strength of his relationship with his family and how being required to attend social events and live in the "fishbowl" of the superintendency was sometimes hard on him. It seemed that his relatedness needs were met through his family and the closer working relationships he had with his staff, so he sometimes felt overextended by the need to be visible in the community. Neither Ricky nor Wilson described how they cared for others and felt cared for by others as predominantly negative, but their comments should be noted in order to convey the nuanced nature of their relationships and how they met their need for relatedness.

Subquestion Two. How do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency describe their sources of motivation? As described in Theme Three: They Have a Core Purpose, all of the participants were motivated by a sense of purpose or calling in their work. Other sources of motivation were also cited by the participants, including people like their staff members, students, and families, and finding success in one's work. Many participants cited their colleagues in their own districts as sources of motivation, including district administrators, building-level administrators, teachers, and other staff members. One of Crosby's comments exemplified the general attitude of the participants who cited coworkers as sources of motivation:

If I can do some cool things with the help of really cool people that are around me and thank God I get along with them and they're 20 years younger than me, they've got the technology skills, they've got the energy and enthusiasm, but we can still make good things happen and have a good time doing it... for me, it doesn't matter if it's a Monday, a Wednesday, or a Friday afternoon, or a Sunday night, it's been a great ride. It's been a lot of fun.

Not only did Crosby describe his relationships with his coworkers as motivating to him, but he also was very clear about how much he enjoyed working with them. For the participants who mentioned their coworkers, it was never just about the people, but about their enjoyment of working with the people. There was also a sense of responsibility and duty towards one's coworkers, as Monroe stated: "I always have to remember when some things or people or conditions are really getting me down or consuming me, I have to remember that there are a lot of people that are counting on me". While Monroe included his coworkers and staff in this comment, he also included students.

All of the participants cited students as a source of motivation, which was reflected in Theme Three: They Have a Core Purpose. However, the participants who had their own children in their school systems specifically cited them as sources of motivation. Prince described how he wanted his “daughter and every other kid who goes to this school division” to benefit from his leadership and Ricky talked about “the motivation is doing what’s right and treating kids the way you’d want someone to treat your own kid”. Monroe explained how he used a yard sign to motivate his staff:

I found one of those signs [Drive like your kids live here] kind of rustically placed on the side of the road and I used it with all of our other school leaders at the end of the year to say, “That’s how we have to serve, that’s how we have to teach, that’s how we have to lead”. As though it impacts our kids because when we personalize that, it changes how we deal with things. I think that’s a big reason why I’m able to do this, to stick with it is because of that personal connection to it.

Although Monroe directly connected his own child and the students in his district with his motivation for persisting in the superintendency, he was not the only participant who attributed his motivation to this source. In addition to Monroe, Prince, and Ricky, John R., Steven, and John J. also cited their own children as a source of motivation.

The other major source of motivation described by the participants was finding success in one’s work. The more the participants saw the positive results of their work, the more motivated they were to continue that work. Speaking as one of the longer serving superintendents, Prince mentioned, “If you want to do something in life and you’re able to have some success doing it, you realize that you can do huge things”. He continued to say, “In both small and large ways, seeing improvements helps me through those hard days”. Crosby specifically talked about why

his smaller district was a good match for him: “I think we’re doing some good things here in our school division and that motivates me. I think one of the motivations for me to keep going is you can make a lot of good things happen without the red tape”. John R. described how successful work motivated him:

Something else that keeps me here is that work. The work that our teachers and our teams are doing is growing and thriving and they come to me and say, “We hope you’re not planning to leave because we’re putting our necks out there trying all these new things and we’re afraid that somebody else might come and tell us to shut this whole operation down”.

Seeing how his leadership was directly affecting not only students but also teachers was motivating to John R. Monroe echoed these comments: “When you’re seeing progress, visible signs of progress and increasing quality, you go, ‘I’m not ready to give up on that ‘cuz I know where we’re going and we’re still moving forward’.” For these participants, success breeds success and a fulfilling sense of motivation.

It should be noted that although Crosby was the only participant who specifically cited the sacrifices he had to make in order to reach the superintendency as a source of motivation, he felt strongly enough about it that it warrants inclusion in this analysis. While still maintaining confidentiality, it is important to know that Crosby’s path to the superintendency was significantly more intricate and drawn out than those of the rest of the participants, and he was clear about how he does not forget that path:

I think there are times when things are tough, when I have to remind myself of how hard I worked. I’ve worked hard to get here and I don’t take it for granted that I’m still here because I worked hard to get here and I’m mindful of the path that I had to take and my

family to get here.

He made similar comments several times in his interview and he was very specific in detailing every step of that long, winding path to his current role. Sacrifice was a source of motivation for Crosby because of his unique experiences, but his lived experience with persistence cannot be fully described without mentioning the role of sacrifice.

Subquestion Three. What supports do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency cite as valuable? Supports that were cited by the participants as valuable included mentors, peers and professional organizations, coworkers and staff, the school board, and family, especially spouses. Each of these sources of support were valuable at different times during the participants' careers. For example, mentors were most valuable before the participants' superintendencies and at the beginning of their current tenures. Charlotte and John J. explained how various supervisors, such as their principals when they were teachers and their superintendents when they were building or district administrators, mentored them along their path to the superintendency. Monroe and Crosby mentioned some of the professors in their doctoral program who were helpful in their guidance of them before they took on the superintendency. Steven, John R., and Ricky discussed how retired superintendents from their districts or neighboring districts were very supportive when they each became superintendents.

Professional organizations such as Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) and other superintendents in Virginia were also cited as valuable supports throughout the participants' superintendencies. VASS is divided into regions and the superintendents within those regions meet with each other frequently for a variety of reasons. It was these regional groups that were cited most frequently. As Wilson explained:

Had it not been for the other superintendents in the region who I could pick up the phone

and say, “I have a finance question”, or “Hey, I’ve got this employee that’s doing this”, I don’t know that I’d ever have made it.

John R. compared his regional superintendents’ group to a “support group”, Crosby described those relationships as “friendships”, and Ricky said that group was a “huge support system”. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD) were also mentioned as sources of support for some participants.

Coworkers and various staff members were another valuable source of support. Ricky talked about getting cards, letters, and other forms of encouragement from many teachers and staff members when he was leading his district through a rough season. Prince mentioned the “really bright people” who did not always have the same mindset as him as being a huge support in terms of creative problem-solving. Clark cited his principals and their willing, hard-working attitudes as being extremely helpful, while Monroe talked about all the “doers” he had in his district who were able to implement innovative solutions to complex problems. Steven discussed how he competed against other internal candidates for his superintendency, but none of those coworkers sabotaged him and they wholeheartedly supported his leadership throughout his tenure. Just as the participants cited coworkers as sources of motivation, they also included them among the sources of support throughout their superintendencies.

The school board was another source of motivation during the participants’ superintendencies. Beyond providing support by repeatedly offering contracts to the participants, school boards offered support by listening, problem-solving, insisting on good self-care on the part of the superintendent, and publicly supporting the superintendent’s actions. Monroe described how valuable public board support was to him:

It's actually a big support during tough times when the board owns something because you wouldn't want it the other way. So I could say, "Well, I gotta get the board to buy in to this and that's gonna take time". Well, what if it goes wrong? Then you're gonna be asking the board to back you up.

Monroe explained that he did have that support from his board and he did not take it for granted. Wilson said he was "blessed" with an "outstanding" board, some members of which he even felt comfortable enough with to vent to about his concerns. Steven described his board as "the best school board in Virginia", which is remarkable because his board had experienced significant turnover during his tenure. In some ways, citing the school board as a source of support is an extension of Theme Two: They Are Chosen because receiving repeated votes of confidence in various forms, from continued employment to public backing, is extremely supportive to the participants.

The last source of support cited by the participants was their families, especially their spouses. This support had endured before and during their tenure and there was every indication that family would be a source of support even after these superintendents retire. Clark described his family's support:

I have a strong, supportive family who supports me and doesn't put pressure on me to not that I'm a failure if the job fails or anything, or any type of negative judgment against me. So being able to have that support, have that love and caring allows me to be who I am in the face of adversity.

Charlotte, Crosby, and John R. described how their families moved to new locations in order to support them and they built happy, productive lives that allowed them to support their superintendent spouses. Crosby explained how one's "significant other is critically important" to

the success and longevity of the superintendent. Wilson, Ricky, Steven, and Prince all described how their supportive relationships with their spouses can help relieve some of the stress of the superintendency. Their wives were their “cheerleaders” who supported their superintendent husbands through late nights, less time at home, and an increased social profile in the community. It is important to mention that the majority of the participants’ marriages were over 2 decades long, so spouses and families were a primary and constant source of support.

Subquestion Four. What goals do persistent superintendents set, why do they set them, and how do they pursue them? In terms of goal content, participants were asked to discuss their professional and personal goals, but most chose to focus predominantly on goals that were overtly professional or directly connected to their leadership in the superintendency. Only a few mentioned personal goals that could be characterized as more personal than professional. In fact, most of the professional goals sounded very much like those included in strategic plans, improvement plans, and exemplary job interview responses. For example, Prince stated that his professional goal was “to meet the Division’s Strategic Plan and School Board Goals”. John R. said something similar when he said, “the goals that I really have are the district’s goals”. Ricky and Wilson wanted all of their schools to attain full accreditation, and both of them along with Steven and Prince wanted to meet the capital improvement needs of their districts. Crosby wanted to fulfill the goal of finishing the 1:1 computer initiative already underway in his district. Every participant mentioned improving student achievement as measured by various metrics, such as Monroe’s professional goals:

Increasing student learning and engagement; increasing and enhancing communication and community engagement; improving and enhancing learning environments, including provide equitable access to resources for all students; literacy for all; expansion of

programs in support of and alignment; 21st century relevant career and college readiness; integration of instructional technology; improved efficiency and effectiveness in operations, finance, and human resources; increasing quality of recruitment and retention as well as more diversification of work force

Monroe was not the only participant who listed a series of goals that read like a strategic plan and included student achievement as a central focus of their goals. Even some of the personal goals were much closer to professional goals, such as Steven's:

To continue to cultivate excellence in all who serve in the school system and to build a leadership team that is so strong that it doesn't need me while never becoming complacent or laissez faire in my leadership and personal work ethic.

Although Steven's personal goal did include some personal elements in it, most of the content of this goal was directly connected to his professional work. John J. stated similar personal goals that were more like professional goals:

Continue to improve my personal leadership skills. Work to support and build capacity for others to serve as leaders. Continue to improve the balance between my personal and professional life. Work to be a collaborative leader who inspires and motivates others.

For the majority of the participants, not only was the content of their goals reflective of the overall work in their districts, but even their personal goals were supporting their professional efforts.

Since most of the personal goals were like those stated by John J. and Steven, there were fewer strictly personal goals. Both Ricky and Wilson had set personal goals of staying in the superintendency for a certain number of years, while Prince set a goal of losing weight. Clark

also wanted to stay “mentally, spiritually, and physically fit”, while Charlotte had a personal goal of “after the superintendency, find another avenue for providing access and opportunities for all students”. John R. talked about how he did not set specific personal goals, but he also noted the contradiction resulting from having no particular personal goals, but still successfully completing marathons and triathlons. He did mention his faith in God and maintaining that relationship as something important to him, as did Monroe. John R. and Monroe also spoke about how their faith informs their identities as fathers and husbands, and how they had personal goals to be the best they could in those arenas, as well as in their superintendencies. The relative dearth of strictly personal goals was an intriguing result that affected how the rest of this research question was answered.

Many of the reasons cited by the participants for their goal motivations have already been discussed in the themes and their sources of motivation in Subquestion Two. Charlotte said, “I believe it is my purpose – my calling” when asked why she chose the professional goals she wrote. Crosby wrote that the motivation for his goals was “an issue of equity and equality” for the students in his district, a motivation that was woven throughout his work. Ricky stated, “I chose these general goals for myself to serve as a reminder as to why I chose education to begin with”, again echoing the connection between his goals and what he saw as the purpose of his job. Steven stated, “I want the division to be better than I found it and to continue to become ever-better even after I am gone”, which speaks to his desire to leave a legacy of high-quality work when he retires. Monroe provided a lengthier description of his goal motivations:

My passion and purpose for being an education leader is about an investment into quality services that support and benefit the needs of all students or children. I am an education leader because I believe in the transformative possibilities of public education in the right

hands. Humble, but confident leaders that are uniquely focused on the good of the people they serve above themselves.

Monroe was clear about how his motivations were represented in the work he led in his district. John J.'s comments not only revealed his goal motivations, but directly connected them to the work of his district: "These goals are aligned to my personal, professional beliefs and K-12 education. In addition, these goals are directly aligned to our school division strategic plan".

Just as the motivations for the participants' professional goals were revealed in the themes and their answers to Subquestion Two, so were the motivations for their personal goals. There were a few comments that shed more light on the motivations for these specific goals. Clark stated, "I have chosen these goals for myself in an effort to remain the best possible clear minded leader that I can be, while not growing stale or becoming obsolete". John J. thought that "It is important to have personal goals so that you maintain a growth mindset". Prince's personal goals were set because "they will help achieve all other goals and assist with good health". Wilson wanted to be one of the longest-serving superintendents in Virginia because of his "competitiveness", although he was not clear as to whether he was competing against himself or his superintendent colleagues. These goal motivations were more diverse than those provided for the professional goals, which is logical given the personal nature of these goals.

The participants were asked to describe how they had met these goals or how they intended to meet them if they had not achieved them yet, but the participants' comments about goal attainment have not been discussed thoroughly in the themes and Subquestion Two. Very few of the participants provided detailed answers to these questions, so some of their answers can be characterized as somewhat broad or loosely defined. For example, Clark responded by saying, "I have accomplished these goals by setting clear standards for myself. That is, moving

through each day doing my personal best”, which is somewhat vague. John J., Monroe, and Prince described using reflection and feedback to meet their goals, and Crosby, Prince, Ricky, and Steven attribute their goal attainment to collaboration with and support from various stakeholder groups, including their coworkers. Wilson simply said that he has already met one of his personal goals, but did not provide further detail. Some participants were slightly more descriptive in a few of their responses. Clark provided a more in-depth answer:

I have formed good relationships with community outlets such as the local community college, local university, local Chamber of Commerce, library, history society, etc. It is through these relationships that opportunity is born and nurtured. We have increased opportunity for students to earn an associate degree concurrent with their acquisition of a diploma. Students also earn certification of their skill sets in the Career and Technical Education (CTE) aspect.

Monroe was also more descriptive about how his team was working toward meeting his professional goals:

Through systemic strategic planning, including the building and articulation of a shared mission and vision, core values, and teamwork. The key foundation to this systemic planning process is the selection and development/maturation of a top-notch leadership team extending from the executive level, school board, building principals/leaders and teacher leaders.

Ricky also cited the strategic planning process as including the ways in which his professional goals would be met. Considering the relative paucity of data regarding goal attainment in this study, it is possible that the data collection method used to secure these data, the electronic questionnaire, inadvertently encouraged the participants to provide brief answers to the questions

about goal attainment. It is also possible that the participants did not yet see these goals as being met because they continue to stay in their roles with the intention of retiring only when their stated goals have been achieved.

Summary

This chapter described the research study and the results, beginning with group and individual portraits of the participants. Phenomenological data were presented in the form of three themes and answers to four subquestions. Theme One was They Choose, which described how and when the participants chose the superintendency throughout their careers. Theme Two was They Are Chosen, which explained how they were chosen by several external sources throughout their journey to the superintendency, and how they continued to be chosen throughout their superintendencies. Theme Three was They Have a Core Purpose, which provided the foundational beliefs that drove the work of all of the participants. Their core purpose drove their choices, which resulted in their being repeatedly chosen for their roles. The superintendency met their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They had several sources of motivation throughout their adult lives, including their core purpose, their staff members, students, and families, as well as being successful in their work. They benefited from several sources of support, including mentors, peers, professional organizations, coworkers, their school boards, and their families. They set mostly professional goals for themselves that they were working toward meeting in the context of their jobs, but some of them also had personal goals that also supported their persistence in the superintendency.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of persistent superintendents in Virginia. This chapter provides a summary of the findings of this study, discussions of the relationship of the study to empirical and theoretical research, and empirical, theoretical, and practical implications. Delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also described.

Summary of Findings

The transcendental phenomenological research design was used to frame this study in order to provide the essence of the phenomenon of persistence as experienced by the participants and to shed light on why they remained in their positions when so many others leave. A criterion sampling method was used to secure 10 participants, who completed an electronic questionnaire about their professional and personal goals, a face-to-face interview, and journal prompts. The data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified version of the method described by Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975). Member checks at repeated points during the study, triangulation of data, and thick, rich descriptions were used to achieve trustworthiness. One central research question and four subquestions were asked in an attempt to craft the essence of persistence in the superintendency and to examine the participants' experiences in light of Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

The central research question asked *What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?* The experiences of the participants were characterized by choosing the superintendency, being chosen for the superintendency, and

having a core purpose. They chose to take a career path that culminated in their current superintendencies and they continued to choose to remain superintendents in their districts, even in the face of stress and loneliness, because they had made a commitment, weren't finished with their work yet, and loved their jobs and communities. All of the participants were chosen to ascend the teaching and administrative ranks to become superintendents, and they continued to be chosen by their school boards and communities. They all had a core purpose that was characterized by a sense of calling or purpose, a love for children, a love for their coworkers, a desire to make a positive difference, and a sense of leaving a legacy that would endure beyond their tenures.

The first subquestion asked *How does maintaining the superintendency meet the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?* Although half of the participants described not feeling a sense of autonomy in their superintendencies, their descriptions of their actions and thoughts belied their unconscious agreement with Deci & Ryan's (2002) supposition that actions that do not derive from the person, but are in agreement with those who forwarded the actions to the person are still autonomous. All of the superintendents described having their need for autonomy met, either by acting in ways that originated from within themselves, or by endorsing and enacting actions that came to them from other stakeholders, such as their school boards or communities. In terms of having their competence needs met, all of the superintendents described feeling effective and useful in their jobs, as well as able to grow their capacities and to express those improved abilities within their professional context. Their continued employment and support from their communities also contributed to their feelings of competence. The participants' needs for relatedness were met by providing them with several avenues for caring for others and for

receiving care from others, such as their coworkers, other superintendents, teachers, students, school board members, and community members. Two superintendents expressed a sense of ambivalence about how the superintendency has affected some of their relationships, but they still echoed the sentiments of the rest of the participants, that the superintendency did provide them with ample opportunity to care for others and to be cared for by others (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

The second subquestion asked *How do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency describe their sources of motivation?* Although the primary source of motivation cited by the participants was encompassed in their core purpose, one of the central themes that emerged in this study, they also cited their staff members, students and families, and success in one's work as sources of motivation. All of these sources played similar roles throughout their careers, including their superintendencies, and continued to drive them to stay in their current positions.

The third subquestion asked *What supports do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency cite as valuable?* Sources of support cited by the participants included spouses and families, mentors, coworkers and other staff members, school board members, and peers and professional organizations. Each of these supports were evident at different stages in the participants' careers, some serving the participants throughout their careers, while others were more prevalent before or at the beginning of their superintendencies. It was very clear that none of the participants believed they could have attained and maintained their superintendencies without multiple sources of previous and continued support.

The final subquestion asked *What goals do persistent superintendents set, why do they set them, and how do they pursue them?* This question was answered in three parts that mirror

aspects of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004): their goal content, their goal motivation, and their goal attainment. The overwhelming majority of goals set by the participants were professional goals, or personal goals that supported their professional work, such as their leadership. A few of the superintendents described goals that dealt with health and fitness or life after retirement. Their goal motivations were directly connected to their core purpose, one of the emergent themes of the study, and their sources of motivation described in response to the second subquestion. Most of the participants gave vague answers in terms of goal attainment, which made sense given that their goals were predominantly professional goals that pertained to the work of their school districts that has not yet been fully realized or achieved. Goals that had been achieved were merely discussed as such, with little explanatory detail.

Discussion

Three central themes emerged from the data analysis: They Choose, They are Chosen, and They Have a Core Purpose. All of the study participants made repeated, active choices that eventually led them to their superintendencies and prompted them to remain in their current roles. All of the participants were also chosen by others to receive support, help, guidance, and job promotions that also contributed to their persistence in the superintendency. All of the study participants were also driven by a multifaceted core purpose that contributed to their persistence. Each of these three themes reflected how the superintendency met the participants' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, and how their sources of motivation and support also contributed to their persistence. Their superintendencies also fulfilled much of the content of their goals and provided them with new goals to strive for within the context of the

superintendency. Each of the key aspects of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) were manifested in the lived experiences of the participants.

Empirical Relationship

This study was firmly grounded in current research and the findings of this study primarily corroborate and extend much of this research. Some facets of the study findings refute current research, but the predominance of findings confirm the conclusions of previous studies.

Small Rural Districts. Of the 10 participants, 4 led predominantly rural districts, 4 led suburban districts of varying sizes, and 2 led districts that encompassed both rural and suburban localities. The experiences of Charlotte, Clark, John J., John R., Steven, and Wilson confirmed much of the current literature on district leadership in small rural school districts. For example, both Charlotte and Clark discussed how leading a small rural district meant less money was available for programs and opportunities for students, so they had to find creative solutions to provide for their students and teachers (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011; Howley, Howley, Rhodes, & Yahn, 2014; Lamkin, 2006; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Charlotte, Clark, and John J. talked about how they had to “wear many hats” in order to lead their districts well because they did not have the same level of district support personnel as some other participants (Copeland, 2013; Kamrath, 2015). They said they often fulfilled job duties that would fall to another person in a larger district (Kamrath, 2015; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Lamkin, 2006). Charlotte, Clark, John J., John R., Steven, and Wilson all mentioned the quality of life in their smaller communities as being a reason they stayed, thus confirming the findings of Maxwell, Locke, and Scheurich (2014). None of these participants looked at their communities as steppingstones, but instead as wonderful places in which to work, raise a family, and eventually retire. They were very tuned into the needs and desires of their communities and they were proud to live and work

in their communities (Copeland, 2013; Copeland & Chance, 1996). They were blunt when they talked about how they knew they could lose their jobs if they did not keep their finger on the pulse of their communities and lead accordingly (CASE, 2000; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Their pride persisted even as they learned to live in the fishbowl of the superintendency, adjusting to being sought out at church, like Wilson, and attending many school events across the district, like John J. (Copeland, 2013; Jenkins, 2007; Kamrath, 2015; Lamkin, 2006). It should be noted that all of the study participants held their doctorates, which is somewhat in contrast to the findings of Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000). While not a complete refutation, it is worth noting that these participants seem to have greater credentials than has been found in previous research.

One final point regarding the relationship of this study to the empirical literature is that this study contributes to the literature on suburban superintendents, an area that has not been explored in as much detail as the rural and urban superintendency. The experiences of Crosby, Monroe, Prince, Ricky, Steven, and Wilson add to the body of literature on the suburban superintendency, especially in the context of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Race. There was only 1 African American participant in this study, so only a few conclusions can be drawn from his experiences alone. Ricky steadfastly believed that his leadership in the superintendency was a boon to his community and that he was making a positive difference in the lives of children, teachers, and other community members. This mindset confirmed the findings of several studies and dissertations (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Escobedo, 2011; Johnson, 2012). Ricky cited the support of his church and fraternity as valuable, thus refuting the findings of Angel, Killackey, and Johnson (2013), Chalmers (2012), and Webb (2013) that many African American superintendents do not have sufficiently strong support

systems. Ricky's fraternity was an African American organization that provided a variety of supports to its members, including help in overcoming professional challenges (Webb, 2013). Ricky's experiences also add to the current body of literature on the experiences of African American men, especially in high-level leadership positions.

Gender. There was only 1 female participant in this study, so few conclusions can be drawn from Charlotte's experiences, but there were some confirmations of current research. Charlotte's experiences before becoming a district leader were in the elementary grades (Kim & Brunner, 2009), she did not purposely strive for the superintendency (Munoz, Mills, Pankake, & Whaley, 2014), and she was promoted from within her district to the superintendency (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Her husband's support of her refutes the findings of Roebuck, Smith, and El Haddaoui (2013) in which women superintendents did not have supportive spouses. It is interesting to note that due to having only a single female participant, this study extended the research on the experiences of male superintendents, especially in terms of their job satisfaction, work/home balance, and stress levels.

Pressures and Stressors. This study confirmed the conclusions of previous studies regarding the pressures and stressors experiences by superintendents. All participants described their jobs as stressful (Boyland, 2013), reiterated the need for them to be everything to everyone (Copeland, 2013; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Tobin, 2006), and detailed the self-care activities that help them cope with stress (Hawk & Martin, 2011). This study extended the research on the self-care routines of superintendents in that it provided descriptions of how the participants coped with stress, including their hobbies, their exercise routines, their pets, their time with family members, and the adjustments in their time management strategies. These findings also highlighted how several school boards supported or even mandated their superintendents make

time for stress management, exercise, or with their families, which adds to the literature on the relationship between superintendents and their school boards (Allen, 1998; Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Fusarelli, Cooper, & Carella, 2000; Tekniepe, 2015).

Why Superintendents Stay. This study confirmed virtually all of the findings of current research on why superintendents remain in their positions in spite of politics, stress, financial pressures, public visibility, and all the other reasons cited in the literature for leaving. This study helps fill a gap in the literature on the superintendency identified by Grissom and Anderson (2012) and Tekniepe (2015) by describing why these participants exhibit persistence in the superintendency. The participants stayed because they loved their communities, which supported them and helped them feel valued and effective (CASE, 2003; Ramirez & Guzman, 1999). As described in one of the main themes resulting from data analysis, the participants felt a strong sense of purpose or calling that was fulfilled in the superintendency (Alston, 2005). The superintendency allowed them to make a positive difference in the lives of children and gave them much satisfaction, even on the hard days (Boyland, 2013; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). While this study confirmed all of these findings, it also extended them by describing the lived experiences of the participants and shedding light on the connection between Self-Determination Theory and persistence in the superintendency (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Theoretical Relationship

The theoretical framework that formed the foundation of this study was Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The primary elements of SDT that were explored in this study include the basic human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and their relationship with causality orientations, types of motivation, and goal

pursuits. In the SDT framework, all of these elements combine to describe a person's sense of self and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002). This research study contributed to the understanding and evidence of all of these elements in the lives of the participants.

Throughout this study, the participants described how their core purposes influenced their choices, including the choices they had a high level of control over and those that they were forced to make. Even the participants who did not feel that they had a high level of autonomy in their jobs also detailed decisions they made that were not only approved by their school boards and other stakeholders, but with which they also agreed and felt comfortable making and implementing. All of the participants evidenced a high sense of autonomy because they all chose to act in specific ways, so even when they did not feel they had control over their circumstances, they did feel that they had control over their responses to those circumstances. They explained how they made these decisions in alignment with their sense of who they were as superintendents and how they positively influenced their environments, both at work and at home, which revealed that their need for competence was met through the superintendency. All of the participants exhibited a level of confidence in their own ability to do their jobs because they had lasted so long in their positions, as well as had received years' worth of praise and feedback about their efficacy. The participants also described a sense of security in their communities and jobs, even though they did not take this sense of relatedness for granted. They enjoyed being able to care for others and feeling cared for by others, but they also explained how they maintained a realistic outlook regarding their future employment. The fact that the participants' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were exhibited throughout their comments and embedded in the major themes of the data, demonstrated a connection between their lived experiences and the basic human needs facet of SDT.

The main themes of this study also connect to the causality orientations of the participants and show that the predominant orientation of the participants is the autonomy orientation. Deci and Ryan (1985a) explained that people who exhibit the autonomy orientation show a “high degree of experienced choice with respect to the initiation and regulation of one’s own behavior” (p. 111). The study participants described behaving in ways that explicitly and implicitly revealed their sense of self, their values, and their beliefs regarding their ability to act intentionally to demonstrate those values. This autonomy orientation is connected to the motivations of the participants, which were predominantly intrinsic motivations, with moments of integrated regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2002). For the most part, the actions of the participants, as described by themselves, demonstrated that they were doing the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing. Their core purposes were heavily influencing their choices, which then affected how others chose them. These core purposes were sometimes evident of intrinsic motivation, such as love for children and coworkers, and a sense of calling, but showed integrated regulation in other circumstances, such as leaving a legacy and making a positive difference. Some purposes were based on outcomes, which connected them to integrated regulation. The purposes that were achieved for the sake of the purposes themselves showed intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2002) described how people who are intrinsically motivated are more self-determined, which certainly resonates with the experiences and words of the study participants.

While there were fewer results stemming from the goal content, motivation, and attainment of the participants, the content of the goals of the participants was connected to the motivation for those goals, which was overwhelmingly intrinsic in source. Most of their goals were set for the sake of the goals themselves, such as growing as a leader or caring for children.

Some goals were more extrinsic in nature, such as maintaining the superintendency for a determined number of years or earning a high salary, but the goal content reveals some of the integrated regulation of that motivation. Again, the content and motivation of the participants' goals demonstrates predominantly self-determined behavior. By describing how the superintendency met the basic human needs of the participants, connecting their actions to their causality orientations and types of motivation, especially as revealed in their goals, this study helps fill a gap in the literature on Self-Determination Theory.

Implications

This transcendental phenomenological study of the lived experiences of public school superintendents in Virginia who persist in the same superintendency for 5 or more years has implications for empirical and theoretical research, as well as practical implications for aspiring and current superintendents, school boards, superintendent preparation program leaders, and coworkers, friends, and families of aspiring or current superintendents.

Empirical

The three main themes of this study revealed that the superintendents made many choices over the course of their careers and the end result of those choices was a long tenure in the superintendent's office. These choices were influenced by their core purposes, which also provided motivation for the participants as they dealt with a variety of stressors and demands on them along their path to their current superintendencies. These motivations and resultant choices influenced how others chose the participants in a variety of ways, including as the recipients of tangible help, advice, guidance, growth opportunities, and job promotions that ended in the superintendency. The participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon of persistence were characterized by their core purposes, their choices, and the choices of others.

These findings of this research study confirmed much of what is currently known about the public school superintendency, such as the experiences of rural district superintendents and the stressors experienced by superintendents of any district. Although only 1 African American and 1 female superintendent elected to participate in this study, their experiences were aligned with much of what current literature says about the experiences of minority and female superintendents. Given that 6 of the participants led suburban districts or districts that contained suburban areas within their geographical boundaries, this study expanded what is currently known about suburban public school superintendents and sets the stage for further research into the experiences of leaders of this specific kind of district, as compared to rural or urban districts. Finally, this study added to the literature on how superintendents cope with the stressors of their jobs and on their reasons for remaining in their roles in their districts for longer than the average superintendent.

Theoretical

There is little research on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) and public school superintendents, so this study adds to the literature base by applying this theory to the lived experiences of the participants. This study found that the major tenets of SDT apply to persistent superintendents, which further bolsters the evidence for this theory, especially in terms of populations of executive-level leaders. These findings have implications for further applications of SDT in inquiries of the experiences of high-profile leaders who work with public entities and are subject to high rates of turnover, such as politicians, local government officials, and corporate leaders. By no means does this study encapsulate the totality of implications for the theoretical research involving SDT, but it does further the examination and application of this seminal theory.

Practical

The results of this study hold practical implications for aspiring and current superintendents, school boards, superintendent preparation program leaders, and coworkers, friends, and family members of aspiring and current superintendents. The lived experiences of the study participants can guide and advise aspiring superintendents, not in the sense of providing a roadmap for success, but for describing how some superintendents found success in their careers in spite of stress and other obstacles. Aspiring and current superintendents may find encouragement and solace in reading about how others have lived in the context of a long-term superintendency. School boards that are interested in hiring and keeping high-quality superintendents for longer than the average tenure may find useful information in the findings of this study, especially in terms of specific actions they can take to support the superintendents they hire. School board members can learn from other school board members through the eyes of the study participants. Some universities and professional organizations implement superintendent preparation programs and the results of this study hold implications for the leaders of those programs. These programs they support the inclusion of teaching aspiring superintendents how to create an effective support system, how to hone in on one's core purpose and make decisions that align with that purpose, and how to practice appropriate self-care in order to be as effective as possible. Finally, the findings of this study can help coworkers, friends, and families of aspiring and current superintendents to see how their support and guidance are instrumental in the success of the superintendent. Spouses and children of superintendents in particular can see the importance of working with the superintendent to craft a life that encourages a sense of well-being in the family and guides the superintendent to act in a

self-determined manner. Sometimes just hearing how others lived through certain experiences can be encouraging, enlightening, and fulfilling.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations include decisions about the research design, setting, and participants. I chose transcendental phenomenology over other research designs because it allowed for the purest description of the phenomenon of persistence based on the lived experiences of the participants as described in their own words (Moustakas, 1994). The setting was delimited to the Commonwealth of Virginia because I live in central Virginia and collecting data from participants outside of the state is prohibitively costly and time-consuming. Participants were delimited to current superintendents who did not expect to retire or leave their position before, during, or immediately after the study timeframe because their experiences with persistence were different from those of retired or aspiring superintendents, who may view persistence differently based on their relationship to the superintendency. Participants were also delimited by their years in their current superintendency. Although current research has not reached consensus on the average length of superintendent tenure, tenure length of 5 or more years is at the upper end of tenure lengths as reported in current literature (Byrd, Drews, & Johnston, 2006; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; National School Boards Association, 2002; Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2003). An exception is for superintendents in large urban school districts, where tenure is approximately 3 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). I delimited tenure length for my participants to 5 or more years in their current position in an effort to balance finding a sufficient number of participants with ensuring all participants have been in their current positions long enough to qualify as having persisted. I also delimited the study participants to public school superintendents due to the

specific nature of this job, as compared to private or other school leaders.

Limitations of this study include participant demographics and limitations associated with the research design. Although I solicited volunteers from all superintendents who met the criteria, only 1 woman and 1 African American man agreed to participate. The rest of the participants were Caucasian men. Thus, these findings cannot be generalized to specific populations such as all female superintendents or all African American superintendents. However, on the whole, great care was taken to ensure that the study findings would be trustworthy, especially in the context of the Virginia superintendency. Although I worked to establish rapport with my participants and to ask interview questions that elicited high-quality data, I could not control how honest or transparent they were in their responses. Due to the high-profile nature of their current employment, there was the possibility that the participants were not be able to share sensitive information about their work. Measures to protect the identities and confidentiality of all participants were taken, including using pseudonyms for participants, school districts, and communities, using only first names and general personal details, securing all hard and digital copies of data, and multiple member checks to allow participant oversight of how their information was used. Finally, although I bracketed my biases, assumptions, and experiences with the phenomenon throughout the study, it was possible that a certain level of interpretation came through in my data analysis and final crafting of the essence of the phenomenon. Again, member checks of the final themes and conclusions were used to mitigate any issues arising from my interpretations.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was a transcendental phenomenological examination of the lived experiences of persistent superintendents in Virginia. While this study contributed to the literature in its own

way, further research is recommended to provide greater understanding of the superintendency and the phenomenon of persistence in educational leadership.

Topics

This study did not delve deeply into how the participants formed their sense of identity or how their superintendencies affected their sense of identity, although the findings revealed that the participants' lives and thoughts were entirely centered on their jobs. Thus, the construct of identity in the context of the public school superintendency would be a fruitful examination to conduct, especially with superintendents who have just retired and might be struggling with their sense of self and purpose. Another avenue for future research would be to examine teachers who aspire to the superintendency and revisit the same participants after they have maintained a superintendency for several years. This research topic could be useful in terms of comparing idealized versions of the superintendency with experienced reality, especially in terms of how supports, motivation, and a sense of autonomy and competence might have changed over time.

Populations

This study did not contribute a significant amount to the literature on female or African American educational leaders, so these populations continue to warrant further study. Given the relative lack of female or African American persistent superintendents in Virginia, future studies would need to expand beyond state borders to encompass a larger population.

Designs

There are many transcendental phenomenological studies on superintendents currently in the literature base, but it would prove useful to conduct comparative case studies with similar populations as those included in this study. The case study research design would allow for much

deeper exploration of the experiences of persistent superintendents, especially in light of the experiences of their families, school board members, coworkers, and other superintendents.

Summary

This qualitative research study used a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of public school superintendents in Virginia who had persisted in their roles in the same district for 5 or more years. Self-Determination Theory provided the theoretical framework for the inquiry (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The central research question, *What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?*, guided the study, and the following four subquestions elicited a deeper examination of the participants' experiences:

Subquestion 1: How does maintaining the superintendency meet the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?

Subquestion 2: How do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency describe their sources of motivation?

Subquestion 3: What supports do superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency cite as valuable?

Subquestion 4: What goals do persistent superintendents set, why do they set them, and how do they pursue them?

After determining which potential participants met the study criteria and soliciting them, 10 superintendents agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire about participant goals, a face-to-face semi-structured interview, and a series of short journal prompts. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Stevick

(1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen's (1975) data analysis method. Data analysis revealed three major themes: They Choose, They are Chosen, and They Have a Core Purpose. All of the study participants had a core purpose that guided them to make a series of choices over the course of their careers that led them to the superintendency, and ultimately led them to continue to choose the superintendency. Their core purpose and their choices influenced others to choose them not only in terms of support and guidance, but also in terms job promotions and continued employment as superintendents. The basic human needs of persistent superintendents were met through their jobs and their choices and core purposes revealed the sources of their motivation, all of which contributed to actions that demonstrate how these participants were self-determined people.

There are two main points that examiners of this study should consider. First, aspiring and current superintendents may find their tenures are longer and their enjoyment of their jobs is greater when they are guided by a core purpose and make choices that align with that purpose. Ensuring that a core purpose underpins all occupational choices may increase one's sense of well-being and lead to a higher quality of life. Second, school board members that wish to hire and keep high-quality superintendents for longer than the average tenure would be wise to consider how the school boards of this study's participants supported them. Several study participants remarked on the relative lack of good candidates for superintendents, especially as older superintendents retire, so school boards that stay mired in politics or provide only lukewarm support for their superintendent may find themselves without suitable candidates for years to come.

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APPENDIX A IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 1, 2017

Katherine H. Howard

IRB Approval 2859.050117: Persistence and Superintendents: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Katherine H. Howard,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B Stamped Informed Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
5/1/2017 to 4/30/2018
Protocol # 2859.050117

CONSENT FORM

Persistence and Superintendents: A Phenomenological Study
Katherine H. Howard
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of persistence and public school superintendents in Virginia. You were selected as a possible participant because you have served in your current public school superintendency in Virginia for 5 or more years. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Katherine H. Howard, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of public school superintendents in Virginia who have persisted in their current superintendency for 5 or more years. Current research does not adequately describe why some superintendents stay in their jobs when others leave for various reasons. As the average tenure length for public school superintendents in Virginia decreases, it is important to explore the experiences of superintendents who persist beyond the average tenure length in order to learn more about the motivations, goals, and supports of persistent superintendents.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete an electronic questionnaire with questions about your demographics and your professional and personal goals. This step should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.
2. Participate in a face-to-face interview (either in person or via online videoconference) with the researcher in which you will be asked a series of questions about your professional and personal life. This step should take approximately 1 hour to complete. If a follow-up interview is required to clarify your responses, an additional interview will be scheduled, but a second interview is not assumed for all participants. This interview will be audio-recorded to assist with data analysis.
3. Respond to 6 journal prompts about your professional and personal motivations and supports. This step should take approximately 1 hour to complete.
4. After the interview has been transcribed, you will have an opportunity to read the transcription and delete any portions of the interview you wish to retract. This step should take approximately 30 minutes, although it may take less time if you do not wish to retract anything.
5. After I have completed the data analysis process, you will have an opportunity to review the themes and accompanying excerpts from transcripts and request retractions again. This step should take approximately 30 minutes, although it may take less time if you do not wish to retract anything.
6. After I have completed synthesizing the data and formulating final conclusions, you will have an opportunity to review the conclusions and request retractions again. This step should take approximately 30 minutes, although it may take less time if you do not wish to retract anything.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
5/1/2017 to 4/30/2018
Protocol # 2859.050117

Risks and Benefits of Participation: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include: contributions to the literature base on the public school superintendency; increased understanding of the motivations, goals, and supports of educational leaders who persist in high-stress jobs; increased knowledge of how to support superintendents, which could be useful for professionals such as university professors, school board members, and human resources personnel.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Although I will be able to link individual participants to the information you provide or are associated with, I will not disclose participant identities or responses. You will choose a pseudonym for yourself, your district, and if you wish, your community, to be used throughout the data collection and analysis process, and in the published dissertation. My dissertation chair will have access to your responses and interview transcriptions, but only in the context of your chosen pseudonyms, so I will be the only person who can connect your identity with your responses.

Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Your responses to the electronic questionnaire will be password-protected and accessible only to me, although they will be available for your review. I will conduct the interviews in a location of your choice where others will not easily overhear our conversation. Transcriptions of the interview will be available for your review and electronic copies will be stored on a password-protected computer. Any hard copies of interview transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Audio-recordings will be used for transcribing purposes, and electronic copies of all audio-recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer. I will make hard copies of your responses in the participant journal, return the original journal to you, and keep the hard copies in a locked filing cabinet.

Per federal regulations, data must be retained for three years upon completion of this study. The above measures will be in place throughout this time. After this time period has expired, all digital files will be deleted and all hard copies will be shredded. I do not anticipate using any of the data after the study is completed and published, other than what is reflected in the published study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. You may withdraw from this study at any time prior to the final dissertation defense.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
5/1/2017 to 4/30/2018
Protocol # 2859.050117

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Katherine H. Howard, Ed.S. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at (434) 284-1391 or khoward8@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Gary Kuhne, at gwkuhne@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at _____

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C Initial Recruitment Letter

Kate Howard

Superintendent Name
 Superintendent
 School District
 School District Address
 School District Address

May 1, 2017

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the dissertation requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of public school superintendents in Virginia who have persisted in their current superintendency for 5 or more years and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. Essentially, my research seeks to know more about why superintendents like you choose to stay in your roles when so many others leave for various reasons.

If you are a public school superintendent of a district in Virginia who has been in your current superintendency for 5 or more years, are not planning to retire or leave your current position in the next 6 months, and are willing to participate you will be asked to complete an electronic questionnaire, a face-to-face interview with me, and several short journal prompts. It should take approximately 4 hours total for you to complete the procedures listed: 20 minutes for the electronic questionnaire, 1 hour for the interview, 1 hour for the journal, and 1.5 hours for member checks of the data. Your name and other identifying information, such as the name of your school district, will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please read, complete, and return the attached informed consent document to me via email: khoward8@liberty.edu. A scanned copy of the signed consent form is acceptable. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, I will contact you with details about the electronic questionnaire, interview, and journal.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me via mail, email, or phone .

I look forward to hearing from you and working with you to tell your unique and powerful story!

Sincerely,
 Kate Howard, Ed.S.
 Principal Researcher

APPENDIX D Initial Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the dissertation requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of public school superintendents in Virginia who have persisted in their current superintendency for 5 or more years and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. Essentially, my research seeks to know more about why superintendents like you choose to stay in your roles when so many others leave for various reasons.

If you are a public school superintendent of a district in Virginia who has been in your current superintendency for 5 or more years, are not planning to retire or leave your current position in the next 6 months, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete an electronic questionnaire, a face-to-face interview with me, and several short journal prompts. It should take approximately 4 hours total for you to complete the procedures listed: 20 minutes for the electronic questionnaire, 1 hour for the interview, 1 hour for the journal, and 1.5 hours for member checks of the data. Your name and other identifying information, such as the name of your school district, will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please read, complete, and return the attached informed consent document to me via email: [khoward8@liberty.edu]khoward8@liberty.edu. A scanned copy of the signed consent form is acceptable. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, I will contact you with details about the electronic questionnaire, interview, and journal.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me via mail, email, or phone (434) 284-1391.

I look forward to hearing from you and working with you to tell your unique and powerful story!

Sincerely,

Kate Howard, Ed.S.
Principal Researcher

APPENDIX E Electronic Questionnaire Email

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my dissertation study! I received your signed informed consent, so the next step is completing the electronic questionnaire. To access the questionnaire, please click [here](#). As indicated in the informed consent, your responses to this questionnaire are confidential, password-protected, and only accessible to me. The questionnaire collects your email address so you can receive a copy of your responses for review. You may change your responses to the questionnaire at any time during the course of the study, even after submitting your answers.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions or concerns at any time. I look forward to meeting and working with you!

Sincerely,
Kate

Kate Howard, Ed.S.
Principal Researcher
(434) 284-1391
khoward8@liberty.edu

APPENDIX F Electronic Questionnaire

Persistence and Superintendents: A Phenomenological Study - Questionnaire

The first 16 questions are the first method of data collection and will be analyzed as part of the research study. Your email address is requested so that you can receive a copy of your responses. You may change your answers at any time during the study or submit another response, even after completing the questionnaire. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Kate Howard

1. Email address *

2. Name

3. Pseudonym for your name (You may choose any first and last name you'd like. Some participants prefer the ease of names with the same initial - e.g. Amber Agee, Agate Public Schools, town of Acheson.)

4. Pseudonym for your district

5. Pseudonym for your community

6. Age

7. Gender

Mark only one oval.

☐ Female

☐ Male

8. Ethnicity/race

9. Marital status

10. Number and age(s) of any children

11. Describe any goals you've set for your superintendency.

12. Why have you chosen these goals for your work?

13. How have (or will) you accomplish(ed) these goals?

14. Describe any personal goals you've set for yourself.

15. Why have you chosen these goals for yourself?

16. How have (or will) you accomplish(ed) these goals?

Nuts and Bolts

These questions are geared toward setting up the interview and delivering the journal to you.

- 17. Would you prefer an in-person interview or are you comfortable with a virtual interview (such as with Skype or Google Hangout)?**

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ In-person interview (I will travel to you, so no travel on your part is necessary)
- ☐ Virtual interview
- ☐ Either option is fine with me

- 18. When would you like to conduct the face-to-face interview? Please provide at least 3 date and time options between now and October 20, 2017. For the most part, days, evenings, weekdays, and weekends are available.**

- 19. Would you prefer to complete the journal electronically (via Word or Google Doc) or hard copy (via a Moleskine journal)?**

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Electronically (I will email the prompts and directions to you)
- ☐ Hard copy (see below)
- ☐ Either option is fine with me

- 20. If you selected the hard copy journal option, I can either mail your journal to you via USPS or I can bring it to the in-person interview. If you prefer I mail the journal, which address would you like me to use? (Please leave blank if you'd prefer I hand-deliver the journal and prompts)**

A copy of your responses will be emailed to the address you provided

APPENDIX G Follow-Up Recruitment Email

Just a short note to share that now that data collection is underway for this study, the majority of participants are finding that the tasks are taking far less time than I estimated in the IRB paperwork. Almost everyone has finished all of the tasks (except for member checks) in less than 1.5 hours, which includes the questionnaire, short journal, and a 35-45 minute interview. The time devoted to the member checks is entirely dependent on the participant's wishes, so most folks are choosing to give only a cursory glance to these checks.

If this shorter, more realistic time commitment works for your schedule and you're still interested in participating, I'd be delighted to include you in my study.

Thank you,
Kate Howard

APPENDIX H – Interview Guide

Interview Guide – Superintendents and Persistence: A Phenomenological Study

LISTEN – ask for elaboration, examples, details, descriptions

Seeking meaning in their own words

Make note of laughs, facial expressions, etc. for field notes

Allow THEM to turn the conversation – just LISTEN and ask questions as needed to get elaboration, details, examples

Problem: Literature doesn't describe psychological nature of persistent superintendents; doesn't tell why some stay when so many others leave

Purpose: To describe the experiences of persistent superintendents in terms of SDT (autonomy, competence, relatedness, goal attainment)

Central Question: What are the lived experiences of superintendents who persist in the public school superintendency?

Date:

Time:

Location:

Participant:

Begin with my background – W&L, UVA, Liberty; sped teacher, instructional coach, and director of C&I; interested in this topic because of paucity of research on why stay (as opposed to why leave) – I'm interested in what makes the superintendents who persist unique (because they truly are unique!)

Interview Questions

This is Kate Howard at _____ on _____. I'm interviewing _____.
Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ask any clarifying questions from the electronic questionnaire

- Tell me about yourself. *Probes:* Your childhood, family, background, hobbies, interests
- Tell me about your career before becoming a superintendent. *Probes:* What made you choose teaching as a career? How long were you a teacher? What made you decide to become an administrator? If participant did not take a traditional path to the superintendency, ask: Why did you choose your initial career?
- How would you describe your motivation for pursuing a career in education?
- Why did you choose to become a superintendent? *Probes:* How did you get the idea to become a superintendent? What goals does the superintendent help you achieve?
- How would you describe your motivation for pursuing the superintendency?

- Describe how you reached the superintendency. *Probe*: Any specific choices or decisions?
- How would you describe your motivation for remaining in the superintendency?
- How would you describe your district? *Probes*: What about your district appeals to you? Why did you choose to become a superintendent in your current district? What is special or unique about your district that influenced your decision to become a superintendent here?
- Describe what it's been like as a superintendent in your district. *Probes*: How have the size and location of your district impacted your superintendency? How have the size and location of your district impacted your motivation to stay?
- How has your relationship with the community affected your decision to remain in the superintendency? *Probe*: Please give an example that describes your relationship with the community.
- How has your relationship with the school board affected your decision to remain in the superintendency? *Probe*: Please give an example that describes your relationship with the school board.
- How has your superintendency impacted your marriage? Your family? Your parenting? Your friendships? Your "me time"? Your self-care?
- What supports allowed you to reach the superintendency? *Probes*: Mentors, spouses, children, university professors, teachers and other employees, religious faith
- What supports help you continue in the superintendency? *Probes*: Professional networks, other superintendents
- How does the superintendency allow you to feel connected to other people? *Probe*: How does the superintendency allow you to care for others and to be cared for by others?
- Describe how the superintendency taps into your strengths as a person and a leader. *Probe*: Describe how the superintendency allows you to experience competence?
- Describe how the superintendency affects your weaknesses as a person and a leader. *Probe*: Describe how the superintendency negatively affects your sense of competence.
- Describe how your experience autonomy in the superintendency.
- What challenges to your autonomy do you experience in the superintendency?

Is there anything else relevant to this topic that you'd like to add?

If necessary, can I contact you if I need clarification on anything in this interview?

Final details – receive journal prompts?; let me know if you have any questions; spend as much or as little time as you'd like; 3-4 weeks is great, but by Halloween is better (if you prefer a deadline); Member checks

I am deeply grateful for your time and your candor in this conversation. Your participation is extremely valuable and I am grateful for the chance to tell your story. If you ever have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. You have my cell phone number and email address, so feel free to reach out at any time.

APPENDIX I – Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

- Day before scheduled interview, read through epoche and make any necessary additions
- Day before scheduled interview, check recording devices
 - Ensure batteries are charged, all cords are accounted for
- Day before scheduled interview, read through Interview Guide
 - Make any adjustments (clarifying questions from electronic questionnaire, details re: journal)
 - Add data to top of Interview Guide (date, time, location, date) and add extra spaces after each question
 - Print hard copy of Interview Guide, travel directions
 - Open a new set of field notes, add same information to top
- Day of scheduled interview, read through Interview Guide again
- At interview, begin by talking about my educational background and my interest in the topic
- Then, ask the first question and let conversation flow from there
- Ask remaining questions if participant doesn't provide information addressed in question
 - Check off questions are they're answered
- State concluding comments from bottom of Interview Guide and address any questions
- Give the journal, prompts, and return mailer to participant
 - Be sure to inform participant of due date of journal
- Day after scheduled interview, send thank you email
 - Include due date of journal and offer to answer any questions
 - Transcribe interview
 - Transfer electronic recordings to computer

APPENDIX J – Journal Prompts

Persistence and Superintendents: A Phenomenological Study

Katherine H. Howard

Journal Prompts

Please answer the following questions in as much detail as you can. This step could take approximately 1 hour to complete, but feel free to dedicate as much time to this task as you'd like.

1. Why do you stay when so many others leave?
2. What gets you through the hard days? What keeps you going?
3. How have you grown or changed since accepting this superintendency? How have your motivations and supports changed over time?
4. How does the superintendency meet your needs? (consider personal as well as professional needs)
5. What do you wish someone had told you before you became a superintendent?
6. Create an image or write a quote, short story, poem, or any other writing that captures what you think of when you think about why you stay in the superintendency. Please explain why this image or quote is meaningful.

APPENDIX K – Sample Interview Transcript

Interview Transcript – Persistence and Superintendents: A Phenomenological Study

Date: August 3, 2017

Time: 9:00am

Location: Dr. Ross's office

Participant: John Ross

Duration: 1:43

KH: We're good. Ok, this is Kate Howard at 9:01am on August 3, 2017. I'm interviewing John Ross. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

JR: Yes

KH: Ok. Ah, I noticed that on the electronic questionnaire, um, the questions about goals were left blank, so do you mind if we dive into those a little bit before we go...?

JR: Certainly yes

KH: Ok. So what professional goals do you have for your superintendency?

JR: I think the reason I left those blank is that I, I don't know that I've really ever articulated professional goals for the superintendency or...

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: ...my, ah, leadership philosophy, and I think one of the reasons I was hired here, um, is that I'm, I'm a big believer in developing a common vision and strategic plans.

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: And so, ah, the goals that I really have are the district's goals.

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: And I don't really have specific, um, superintendent goals.

KH: Ok

JR: Maybe that's unusual. [laughter] I hope that doesn't mess up your research findings but...

KH: Nope

JR: ...I've never sat down and said, "you know, I want to do this by 5 years" or "I want to do this by 10 years" or "I, I wanna be in a bigger district or make more money" or any of those things. Those have never really been guideposts for me.

KH: Ok, ok. Would you say the same is true for any personal goals that you've maybe may or may not have had during the superintendency?

JR: Well, when you say personal goals can you really, cuz that kinda threw me a little bit too?

KH: Ok

JR: You mean personal professional goals or...?

KH: [sigh] It could be anything from you wanted to be sure to dedicate time, um, as a father with your family while you were also balancing professional work.

JR: Ok, ok

KH: It could be that you wanted to... now in your case, you've already attained your, you know, doctorate, but, you know, possibly get...

JR: Ok

KH: So anything, so dovetailing, yes, with professional, but not necessarily...

JR: Ok. Again, I don't know that my lens on the world kind of looks at things that way and, and, don't, um, that doesn't mean I'm not a goal-oriented person. I really am. Um, I'm, ah, I do ultramarathons.

KH: [laughter]

JR: [laughter] And I have done a couple Ironman triathlons.

KH: Wow!

JR: And, um, and all since I started this job by the way. Um, I, I do feel very committed to my family. Um, I am a person of faith. I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I mean, you're from Liberty, so I can probably say that during this interview.

KH: Yes, it's fine.

JR: Um, and, and so, that guides a lot of, of what I do in my personal life. But I don't know that I've ever set any specific personal goals. Um, and I think maybe that's because, um, I'm a pretty content person.

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: And so, there's not a lot out there that I'm saying, "ooh, I wanna be this or be able to do that". That doesn't mean I'm perfect...

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: ...Or feel like I've accomplished everything. It's just, um, and and and, I've been very blessed with job opportunities, in and out of education.

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: Um, and my educational master's degree, bachelor's, doctorate were all completed prior to coming into the superintendency. So there's really nothing else out there at this point... I mean, I guess the only thing I would mention is that, um, I'm now at the stage in the state retirement system that I do start thinking about if I were not a superintendent, ah...

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: ...if that's not something I felt called to do anymore, or or you know, got fired or...

KH: [laughter] Right

JR: [laughter] ...whatever the situation might be, um, would I seek another superintendency or would I go out in different, different directions? But with that I really haven't done a whole lot, um with that. I am going to teach some graduate school classes...

KH: Mmm hmm

JR: ...starting this fall. Um, but that's really more of giving back than it is thinking about transitioning. But, but certainly that would be an opportunity I might consider. I just don't know when that would be.

KH: [laughter]

JR: I felt bad that I didn't answer those questions.

KH: No

JR: I almost put that explanation in there, but I felt like we were going to talk so I could just explain that to you.

KH: And that, and that's perfect so thank you for taking that time.

JR: Yeah