

**Female Assistant Superintendents in Middle Space Leadership:  
A Multiple Case Study**

by

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. There is little research on female assistant superintendents or middle management in school districts thus this study will raise awareness of the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. The central research question was how do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders? The researcher utilized the multiple case study approach to describe the essence of female assistant superintendent experiences as middle space leaders in urban, suburban, and rural local education agencies in Alabama. Female assistant superintendents were interviewed in their district central offices to allow the researcher to capture thick, rich description to understand their experiences. The researcher analyzed novice and veteran female assistant superintendents' experiences within and across both cases. Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared the challenges obtaining and sustaining the assistant superintendency, facilitating factors that assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions, a description of how they described their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions, and the differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents. The findings from this study contributed to the development of a framework of the concept of middle space leadership for females in assistant superintendent positions. This study had limitations. Further research is recommended.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Female assistant superintendents are immersed in middle space leadership as they work in middle management positions in the central offices of local education agencies. In fact, women made up 20.6 percent of assistant superintendents as listed in the 1992 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Study (Grogan, 1996). Despite being in the minority in 1992, female superintendents were more prevalent than in the past decades (Glass, 2000). A more current statistic shows that 23 percent of superintendents were women (Wallace, 2015) compared to 2.8 percent being female superintendents in 1989 (McCabe, 2001). When Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) conducted the 2000 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) study, 297 female superintendents participated in their study of 2,262 superintendents; notably, 50.8 percent had been assistant superintendents prior to becoming superintendent. Similarly, when Kowaski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) analyzed the 2010 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) study, they found that of 430 of the 1,867 female superintendents participating, 50 percent had been assistant superintendents prior to becoming superintendent.

The position of assistant superintendent is an important position as it can be a pathway to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), “the earlier that aspiring women become assistant/associate/deputy superintendents, the greater their opportunities to become superintendents” (p. 64). Furthermore, the assistant superintendent assists the superintendent with the daily operations of the school system and learn the territory in the central office. As female



assistant superintendents work in these positions, they are in a location known as middle space (Oshry, 1993) that is between upper management and lower workers. This position has a tendency to be demanding, as middle space leaders must work with both upper management and lower level workers (Armstrong, 2009; Oshry, 1993). When Armstrong (2009) conducted a study of assistant principals, she found when administrators were in this “middle space,” they lacked “clearly defined goals, boundaries, and duties” which led to increased “transitional stress, strain, and confusion” (p. 80). Similarly, female assistant superintendents may experience different thoughts, ideas, and feelings as they work in middle space leadership.

Oshry (1993) was the first to selectively use the term middle space to describe the location of middle managers in a corporate organization, but more recently, the concept of the middle space leader has been researched in the education realm as Armstrong (2009) first used the term middle space leadership as it applied to assistant principals. According to Armstrong (2009), middle space is used to describe the *location* of middle managers in the organization, but it also refers to the “psychological and social phenomena” (p. 79) that emerges during the transition to the role to the new middle administrative position. When Oshry (1993) described middle space, he stated “whoever enters middle space is caught between the conflicting agendas, perspectives, priorities, needs, and demands of two or more individuals or groups” (p. 402). When describing middle space leadership, Armstrong (2009) posited “the concept of ‘middle space’ is also consistent with the ‘betwixt and between’ or liminal feelings of disequilibrium and dislocation that characterize transitional neutral zones and passages” (p. 79). Thus, it can be speculated that female assistant superintendents may experience similar dynamics of

being in the middle space. They have likely left building level leadership and teacher/principal peers, and although they are central school district administrators, they are at a level below the top leader of the district.

This study focused on the experiences of female assistant superintendents as they obtain and sustain their positions as middle space leaders. Thus, the study was conducted to answer the following central research question: How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders?

### **Statement of the Problem**

Middle space leaders work in organizations including local education agencies all over the world. As these middle space leaders experience “psychological and social phenomena” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 79), they work between two groups. Working between senior management and lower level workers can lead to stress, and often no formal training or preparation for working in middle space leadership accompanies the acquisition of that leader position. Although Oshry (1993) is the first to selectively use the term middle space to describe the location of middle managers in an organization, the concept of the middle space leader has only been researched in the education realm as Armstrong (2009) first used the term middle space as it applied to assistant principals. However, middle space leadership as it applies to female assistant superintendents’ experiences has yet to be explored. Thus, female assistant superintendents and their experiences with middle space leadership need to be investigated to fill a gap that exists in the literature in regards to middle space leadership as it applies to female assistant superintendents. Though male middle space leaders may also experience the particular

phenomenon of middle space leadership, the researcher chose to focus on female assistant superintendents, as they are still in the minority in central office leadership positions. This study will contribute to the understanding of middle space leadership in yet another context of school leadership – central school district administration.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. The researcher aimed to answer the following central research question: How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining and sustaining their position?
2. What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
3. How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?
4. Is there a difference in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and, if so, what are the differences?

The results of this study will contribute to the development of a framework of the concept of middle space leadership for females in assistant superintendent positions.

### **Methodology**

Using qualitative methodology, the researcher conducted a multiple case study to explore female assistant superintendents' experiences in obtaining and sustaining their positions in middle space leadership. This multiple case study used two cases to investigate the phenomenon. The two cases were three novice female assistant superintendents and three veteran female assistant superintendents. The first case consists of three novice female assistant superintendents with experience of being an assistant superintendent no more than four years. The other case consisted of three veteran female assistant superintendents with experience of being an assistant superintendent of five or more years.

According to Creswell (2013), conducting multiple case study allows the researcher to reveal multiple perspectives of experiencing the phenomenon. Yin (2014) added case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon...in depth and within its real-world context...” (p. 16) and allows for multiple cases to be studied. Similarly, when describing case study, Creswell (2013) asserted that case study research is conducted to study cases within their context. Also, case study research focuses on the exploration of a phenomenon to fully understand the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). To clarify, exploring the essence of the phenomenon will enable the researcher to describe the lived experiences in narrative form, and compare the two cases – novice and veteran female assistant superintendents.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will raise awareness of the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. Currently, there is little research on female assistant superintendents or middle

management in school districts. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007) “research that is focused narrowly on women in the superintendency is a relatively recent phenomenon” (p. 3). Few studies exist on female assistant superintendents’ experiences in obtaining and sustaining their positions. Armstrong (2009) made the only reference to middle space leadership in education in her research on assistant principals while Oshry (1993) made the only reference to middle space as it relates to the location of middle managers in the corporate organization. A Google Scholar search and a search of Auburn University databases yielded no results for the terms “middle space leadership” and “assistant and/or female assistant superintendents” when terms were searched altogether. Also, the database searches resulted in no articles that made reference to both “assistant and/or female assistant superintendents” and “middle space leaders” nor “assistant and/or female assistant superintendents” and “middle space leadership” with a search of the key phrases listed in quotes with terms searched altogether.

Research has shown female assistant superintendents do experience challenges and barriers; however, little is known about their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders and if those experiences are different for novice and veteran assistant superintendents.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations to this study. Since the study was conducted with six female assistant superintendents in one southeastern state, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. Also, since the researcher is also a female assistant superintendent, she had to guard against researcher bias; therefore, she attempted to bracket her experiences. Lastly, the researcher could not guarantee participants shared the totality of their

experiences, and each participant's context was different, accounting for variation in their experiences.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study includes five chapters that explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents' in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. A review of related literature is discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, design of study, participants, role of the researcher, and data collection and analysis. A detailed analysis of the findings is presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research in Chapter 5.

### **Summary**

In summary, middle space leadership is performed by individuals who work between upper management and lower level workers. Middle space leaders' roles in the organization are vital as they work between the two groups to ensure the success of the organization. Assistant superintendents are middle space leaders in the central administration of a school district. Research will be conducted to understand the experiences of female assistant superintendents, and a comparison will be made between the experiences of novice and veteran assistant superintendents.

### **Definition of Terms**

Assistant Superintendent – public school administrative position responsible for helping the superintendent oversee the operations of the school system.

Middle Leader – those leaders between senior management and lower level workers who hold middle positions (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Turner, 2007).

Middle Management- personnel between the top management and lower level workers (Pepper & Giles, 2015).

Middle Manager – a term synonymous with middle space leader; those who work in middle management and help make decisions (Cawthorne, 2010); those who act as a bridge and buffer between upper level management and lower level workers (Clegg & McAuley, 2005); both leader and follower (Kerry, 2003).

Middle Space – the location of the managers between that which is above and that which is below; the space that pulls a manager between two levels in the organization (Oshry, 1993).

Middle Space Leader – a term synonymous with middle manager and used to refer to someone who occupies a position in middle space between upper management and lower level workers.

Middle Space Leadership – leadership while occupying a middle space (Armstrong, 2009).

Novice female assistant superintendent – female assistant superintendent who has been employed as an assistant superintendent no more than four years.

Veteran female assistant superintendent – female assistant superintendent who has been employed as an assistant superintendent five or more years.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

Across the United States, female superintendents are still few in number (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009; Glass, 2000; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Polleys, 1999; Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004; Sherman, Munoz, & Pankake, 2008; Silverman, 2004; Sutton, 2008; Wallace, 2015; Washington, Miller, & Fiene, 2007). The position of female assistant superintendent, which is a central office position, can be a pathway to the position of superintendent (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Additionally, the position of assistant superintendent can be called a place of middle space leadership. As Armstrong (2009) described middle space leadership, she stated that “the concept of ‘middle space’ is also consistent with the ‘betwixt and between’ or liminal feelings of disequilibrium and dislocation that characterize transitional neutral zones and passages” (p. 79). Armstrong drew the concept from Oshry (1993), who noted that middle space refers to the “psychological and social phenomena” that emerges during the transition role to the new administrative position and the middle manager’s position and that middle space leaders tend to be “caught between the conflicting agendas, perspectives, priorities, needs, and demands of two or more individuals or groups” (Oshry, 1993, p. 79). To clarify, middle managers work between senior management and lower-level workers in the “organizational hierarchy” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 79). Armstrong (2009) posited that



engagement in middle space leadership brings inevitable challenges to individuals working in a middle management position.

Furthermore, middle space leadership describes the transitional period or passage from one career step to another (Armstrong, 2009). According to Ebbers, Connover, and Samuels (2010), working in middle management positions can lead to career advancement. Female assistant superintendents, working at the level just below the superintendent, can be classified as middle space leaders. For example, female assistant superintendents often oversee instructional improvement which will better prepare them for the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan; 2007; Grogan & Bunner, 2005). A review of literature on the role of central office, female superintendents, female assistant superintendents, and middle space leadership as a conceptual framework contributed to researcher's understanding of this overall study of female assistant superintendents.

This chapter has four main sections. The first section provides an overview of the role of central office in leadership of school districts and its role in accountability and instructional improvement. Included are the subheadings of central office as learning organization, central office and assistance relationships, and central office and boundary spanning. The second section addresses the statistics and challenges of female superintendents. This section is followed by the role, challenges, and mentoring needs of both male and female assistant superintendents. Finally, the last section will include an overview of middle space leadership which will be used as the conceptual framework.

### **Role of Central Office**

The superintendent is known as the chief executive officer of the school system (Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2011;

McCabe, 2001; Scherr, 1995). Along with being the CEO, today's superintendent is now responsible for improving schools (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Hoyle et al., 2005; McCabe, 2001). According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), overseeing curriculum and instruction is a current role of the superintendent. When Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) conducted the 2000 study of the American School Superintendency, they found that more female superintendents were expected to be instructional leaders. As a matter of fact, 36.5 percent of female superintendents stated they were expected to be instructional leaders whereas only 24 percent of males noted they were expected to be instructional leaders (Glass et al., 2000). With the centralized operations located in the superintendent's office, the central office plays a vital role in leadership of school districts and accountability and instructional improvement (Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Mizell, 2010). With high stakes testing, schools are trying to improve. Accountability depends on students being successful when taking state assessments thus promoting student achievement (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005).

Since the 1980s, school accountability and improving schools have been studied by educators (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005). With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, accountability has been heightened and educators grapple for ways to continue to improve teacher performance and student learning (Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Jennings & Rentner, 2006). According to Hanushek and Raymond (2005), accountability focuses on performance and continuing to show instructional improvement. Instructional improvement includes improving the overall dynamics of school culture (Seashore, 2009). Furthermore, school improvement includes improving the academic performance of students and improving the performance of teachers, thus improving both teaching and

learning (Copland, 2003). Instructional improvement includes examining school data on achievement test scores and evaluating teacher performance (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). Instructional improvement also focuses on teacher recruitment, support, and professional development (Corcoran et al., 2001). In addition to professional development, instructional improvement focuses on improving the school's curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). Next, developing and growing parental relationships and community partnerships is also important in instructional improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Thus, the accountability movement encompasses many areas that feed into overall school improvement.

At the epicenter of this accountability is central office involvement. The Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Personnel Director, Curriculum Coordinator, Federal Programs Coordinator, Special Education Coordinator, Assessment Coordinator, Child Nutrition Coordinator, Maintenance Coordinator, and Transportation Coordinator are common central office roles. Additionally, these roles require decision making by these key personnel who oversee different responsibilities at central office. All in all, central office plays an important role in leadership of school districts and accountability that involves making decisions and supporting principals. The purpose of this section is to examine the role of central office in the leadership of school districts as a learning organization, establishing assistance relationships, and serving as a boundary spanner.

**Central office as learning organization.** Central office administrators must make decisions to operate as a “learning organization” (Honig, 2008, p. 629). Honig (2003) conducted a qualitative case study where four school-community partnership policies were examined through observations and interviews and she found that central

office administrators engage in organizational learning by collecting information about partnerships and then deciding how to use or incorporate that information in daily operations. Additionally, central office administrators must be dedicated to learning. In turn, central office administrators must use their knowledge from learning to inform all decisions to ensure improvement (Dickson & Wilson, 1991). According to Honig (2008), central office administrators work with schools to promote improvement. Central office administrators also examine the process of learning and realize learning involves developing professionally with others and learning collectively as a team (Honig, 2008). According to Daly and Finnigan (2010), knowledge transfer can occur if there is a shared understanding of the outcomes. In fact, the central office staff should be establishing learning communities where shared learning takes place (Honig, 2008).

Central office administrators should use their experience and other information to make decisions. In a three-year case study of an urban school district in which interviews, observations, and other documents were analyzed, Coburn, Toure, and Yamashita (2009) found central office personnel make decisions utilizing pre-existing and content knowledge. This decision making is reinforced by what central office administrators have learned working in and being a part of the organization. Additionally, Honig (2008) found that central office must also make decisions about how central office uses collected information. Central office staff must be willing to learn from experience and allow this experience to be used as a resource. Central office staff must be willing to find which information is best to use and determine how that information should be used to drive decisions (Honig, 2012).

**Central office and assistance relationships.** In addition to central office being dedicated to learning, central office must provide assistance to schools in the form of assistance relationships (Honig, 2008). This assistance can come in the form of assistance plans. According to Tucker (2001), every leader in a supervisory role should want to provide assistance in the form of assistance plans to promote the success of those supervised. The central office personnel specifically supervise and assist school principals in the district. This assistance may be provided in the form of coaching or providing information or resources to principals in the schools. According to Johnson and Chrispeels (2010), coaching principals is very important and should be included in the professional development of principals. Honig (2008) found assistance relationships include mentoring new school professionals.

First, these assistance relationships involve modeling. According to Honig (2008), modeling can show principals what desirable and acceptable looks like, increase conversations, encourage guided thinking, and analyze “professional practice” (p. 636). Honig (2012) found that modeling not only consists of seasoned principals providing assistance to new principals through mentoring, but also requires principals demonstrating best practices to teachers. In order for principals to provide modeling to teachers, central office must first provide modeling support to principals. Central office must show principals how instructional leaders behave. Central office must engage in guided thinking so principals know how to implement guided thinking among teachers. It is important for central office to model productive conversations and dialogue to principals. According to Honig and Venkateswaran (2012), central office staff who engage in dialogue and conversation with principals are more likely to make sense of this

process and, in turn, principals will engage in dialogue with their staff. Furthermore, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) found engaging in dialogue will open the lines of communication. Engaging in dialogue with teachers helps the principal become a critical thinker (Honig, 2012). Central office must be sure principals understand the importance of communicating with staff and the importance of the principal's engagement in decision making. Honig (2012) further found central office should model the work without completing the work for the principals to encourage learning.

Central office can support principals a number of other ways such as operating as instructional leaders and promoting principal improvement. In a qualitative case study conducted in Atlanta, New York, and Oakland's urban school districts, Honig (2012) found that central office can support principals as instructional leaders. Central office staff need to provide hands-on professional development or onsite learning to principals. In a study of an elementary school district in California whereas interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents were reviewed, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) found that central office engaged in providing professional development through hiring retired principals to act as principal coaches and having professional development sessions during principal meetings was a way to promote principal improvement. Central office assistant superintendents or directors can also provide support and assistance to principals. By providing support, they help principals improve their instructional leadership. However, Honig (2012) found that central office staff are often not familiar with these roles of providing instructional support to principals as they usually carry out managerial roles to include completing paperwork and meeting deadlines.

Central office staff must become teachers of principals to promote instructional improvement. By central office staff acting as teachers, instruction and conditions for students are improved. Honig (2012) found that effective instructional leadership leads to quality teaching that leads to student success. Moolenaar, Daly, and Slegers (2010) added that effective leadership provides a climate conducive for improvement. Furthermore, Honig (2012) found that principals improve teaching by “observing classrooms and giving teachers feedback and praise, modeling instruction, and using inquiry-based approaches that fostered teachers’ and principals’ reflections on their practice” (p. 736). It is vital for principals to understand the importance of interacting with teachers and having a productive relationship that fosters communication (Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010). Likewise, central office administrators need to have the same relationship that promotes communication as well as collaboration with principals (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Furthermore, Honig (2012) posited “job-embedded supports” are needed to improve schools (p. 736). In other words, central office must ensure principals are able to provide instructional leadership by providing support to teachers and resources such as job-embedded hands-on learning (Honig, 2012). According to Johnson and Chrispeels (2010), this support can be in the form of “trainer-of-trainers model” (p. 754). This turnaround training is an efficient and beneficial way of providing job-embedded hands-on learning support to teachers. Honig (2012) further found it is vital for central office administrators to avoid past practices and old ways that concentrate on basic supervisory roles; instead, central office must focus on improving principal leadership.

Additionally, central office personnel must also support principals through differentiation of professional development. Honig (2012) found differentiation would benefit all principals because support would depend on the principals' needs. Furthermore, Coburn et al. (2009) found differentiation will ensure all different abilities and needs' levels are meant (p. 1133). For instance, if the principal was struggling with data analysis, support would be available to meet his or her needs in this area. Differentiating support is important because not every principal needs the same prescribed plan to improve. Daly and Finnigan (2010) asserted that targeting the level of support needed is vital for improvement to occur. Central office staff needs to provide this support throughout the school year as it is needed (Honig, 2012). Honig (2012) continued central office staff can use evidence to identify needs of each principal and determine the principal's future professional development. Central office must help the principals understand information and data to determine whether quality teaching is taking place (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Central office personnel must be able to explain walkthroughs and make sure principals understand data (Honig, 2012).

Central office must be sure to create and sustain social engagement in joint work (Honig, 2008). Honig (2012) described joint work as an assistance relationship whereas central office staff works with principals to improve the principals' performance as instructional leaders. According to Johnson and Chrispeels (2010), this assistance can be in the form of professional development designed to promote collaboration between central office and principals. Instead of evaluating principals for performance measures, central office would work alongside the principal to improve their performance (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Honig (2012) further stated that joint work helps principals see the



importance of their own development. Principals need to see the whole picture. Central office can start working with principals by addressing questions on what the principals perceive as a problem with practice (Honig, 2012). All in all, Honig (2012) believed central office staff learns, too, from the process and as a result, joint learning occurs. Furthermore, this process involves increased knowledge through interaction. According to Coburn, Toure, and Yamashita (2009), joint engagement forces “shared understandings of problems and solutions” (p. 1145). Social engagement can be in the form of conversation and dialogue (Honig, 2012). According to Johnson and Chrispeels (2010), conversation and dialogue encourages critical thinking and principals must be able to reflect on what works and does not work. It can occur after modeling as a result of new ideas and practices being observed. Also, social engagement enables discussion about the practices of other teachers and increases teachers’ knowledge (Honig, 2012). In a qualitative case study that consisted of interviews, observations, and document analysis of three urban school districts in Atlanta, New York, and Oakland, Honig (2012) found joint work led to principals who were more informed in identifying quality teaching practices.

According to Farley-Ripple (2012), central office must be willing to find and consider several tools to improve teaching and learning. These tools may be in the form of “rubrics, worksheets, and self-evaluation tools” (Honig, 2012, p. 753). Using these tools will equip principals to use the results of observations and walkthroughs to strengthen teaching and learning. Principals will then use the tools to model quality teaching to teachers (Honig, 2012). According to Honig and Venkateswaran (2012), principals must understand working with these tools. Central office can demonstrate how

to use these tools which will, in turn, increase principal understanding. Furthermore, central office can introduce best practices for principals to use to model quality teaching (Honig, 2012).

**Central office and boundary spanning.** In addition to making decisions to operate as a learning organization while engaging in mutual learning activities and forming assistance relationships, central office must also act as a “boundary spanner” (Honig, 2006). Daly and Finnigan (2010) explained boundary spanning activities as the sharing of information and resources locally between central office administrators and principals that leads to more connectedness between central office and local school sites. For example, when central office administrators find and collect information to use within the school system, they are acting as a boundary spanner. Honig (2008) found searching for information includes examining collected data and making changes that will lead to school improvement. According to Farley-Ripple (2012), searching for information involves instrumental and conceptual use of data. Central office administrators will have access to information or documents that can lead to organizational improvement (Honig, 2008).

Central office administrators also search for information that is not available within the organization that will lead to improving the organization. Honig and Coburn (2007) found searching for information includes examining multiple sources. Furthermore, central office administrators must be able to use research to inform and support decisions (Farley-Ripple, 2012). When a case study of Hamilton School District was conducted, Farley-Ripple (2012) found that when central office engaged in research, their decision making was impacted. Searching for information also enables central

office administrators to make decisions that will foster positive school-community partnerships (Honig, 2003). However, central office administrators must consider time constraints and unproductive outcomes when searching for information (Honig, 2003). Additionally, Honig (2009) found that central office staff who search for information are able to successfully manage the information thus, implementing the new information into policy.

In a qualitative case study analyzing interviews, observations, and records of Oakland's school district's Healthy Start School-Linked Services Initiative, Village Centers Initiative, and Oakland Child Health and Safety Initiative, Honig (2006) found boundary spanning had advantages and required commitment from central office when central office administrators collected data and used it to improve teaching and learning. Honig (2006) found that boundary spanning is also needed to form and build school partnerships and can be challenging. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) added central office's ability to communicate to other sites within the organization and use of resources such as partnerships and professional development promotes boundary spanning. According to Honig (2009), boundary spanning is needed to enable district central offices to work with other organizations to ensure school improvement thus building relationships.

Certain conditions must be in place to ensure successful boundary spanning. First, central office personnel must be able to find resources and have the ability to put this information into context they can use (Honig, 2006). Next, central office personnel must have the ability to understand what they need and how it can be used to benefit their organization (Honig, 2006). Daly and Finnigan (2010) added that central office

administrators must have the knowledge and competence to act as boundary spanners as this sharing of information and resources should lead to relationships and partnerships. Additionally, central office staff must be able to communicate the information among different organizations ensuring the understanding of the use of the evidence or information. Honig (2009) found that it is extremely important for boundary spanners to be comfortable and have some degree of understanding of the nature of the resources to ensure their use for school improvement. Moreover, time management must be addressed due to job demands that cause conflicts with prioritizing what is most important (Daly, Finnigan, Jordan, Moolenaar, & Che, 2014; Honig, 2006). Thus, central office effort is needed to accomplish boundary spanning as it is complex.

In conclusion, central office does play a vital role in the leadership of school districts and accountability by functioning as a learning organization, establishing assistance relationships, and serving as a boundary spanner. Central office administrators must be able to make informed decisions and support principals. Operating as a learning organization, central office work must be grounded in organizational learning. When the central office itself forms its own internal learning organization, its focus is on improving the overall organization. Also, central office staff must support principals through use of assistance relationships. Assistance relationships can be the difference between a struggling principal and a successful principal. Also, these important relationships include being able to search and locate evidence and incorporate evidence and making sense of how to use the evidence. Forming assistance relationships will equip principals with the tools they need to effectively lead schools. Furthermore, boundary spanning activities are needed to promote opportunities of growth for principals. Central office

must support principals to improve teaching and learning. All in all, investing time and effort must be at the forefront of achieving accountability in instructional improvement and ultimately, to teaching and learning success.

### **Female Superintendents**

It is not uncommon to find females as superintendents of school systems since women dominate the education profession, but males still dominate the role. When the United States Department of Education conducted a study in 2012, the department found women represented 76 percent of teachers and 52 percent of public school elementary and secondary school principals (Wallace, 2015). Although women dominate the education profession as teachers and principals, female superintendents are still the minority compared to male superintendents (Wallace, 2015). Regardless of being the minority, female superintendents are more prevalent than in the past decades (Glass, 2000; Wallace, 2015) with 23 percent of superintendents being women in 2015 (Wallace, 2015) compared to 2.8 percent being female superintendents in 1989 (McCabe, 2001). Women have earned these positions by waiting to move into the superintendency which Shakeshaft (1985) refers to as “wild patience” (p.134).

In local education agencies, women who are hired as superintendents are likely to be transformational leaders. According to Funk, Pankake, and Schroth (2002), women have effective leadership styles as they are found leading in transformational ways. In fact, Wegge, Jeppesen, Weber, Pearce, Silva, Pundt, and Piecha (2010) found the use of transformational leadership is an effective leadership practice. Although still the minority, women are hired as superintendents because their primary focus is on instruction and collaboration (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Sherman, Muñoz, & Pankake,

2008). According to Sherman et al. (2008), female superintendents were more likely to lead using “a collaborative style of decision-making” (p. 244). Additionally, women administrators rely on and see collaboration as vital when leading and making decisions (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Scherr, 1995). In addition to Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), when Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) conducted a study on female superintendents, two respondents shared how their use of collaborative leadership benefitted their school district and helped the board and community see they were the right superintendents for the job. When Funk et al. (2002) conducted a qualitative study, they found professional and personal characteristics that were exhibited by female superintendents to include

...being a visionary, acting professionally and ethically, allowing time for dreaming and creating, communicating effectively and often, motivating staff and self, being truly committed to their leadership role and to children, having a strong work ethic, and having the energy and stamina in order to do their jobs. (p. 6)

Additionally, in the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey of women administrators, one respondent elaborated on the abilities of female superintendents to demonstrate patience and compassion with stakeholders (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Furthermore, Kowalski and Stouder (1999) conducted a study and found women superintendents are more likely to delegate tasks than male superintendents. Similarly, DiCanio, Oakdale, Schilling, Ferrantino, Brook, Rodney, and Tatum (2016) found that women leaders are more likely to create environments where emphasis is placed on “shared values, traditions, and... a learning community” (p. 70). Additionally, when

women were named superintendents they were encouraged to get the position by the board members urging them to apply, or they were even groomed into the position (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). This section aims to review research studies that have investigated statistics and challenges of female superintendents.

**Statistics of female superintendents.** Women are more likely to serve as superintendents than in the past. McCabe (2001) posited there were only 1.2 percent female superintendents in 1982 while there was an increase to 2.8 percent of female superintendents in 1989. According to Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000), “the number of female superintendents increased from 6.6 percent in 1992, to 13.2 percent in 2000” (p. 15). Brunner and Grogan (2007) found 18 percent of women were superintendents in 2003. When the United States Department of Education conducted its 2012 survey of schools, the department found 23 percent of women were superintendents of public schools while in 2000 there were 13.2 percent of women superintendents (Wallace, 2015). Although men dominate the superintendency, women dominate the teaching positions in classrooms (Glass et al., 2000; Grogan, 1996; Kowalski et al., 2011). When Glass et al. (2000) conducted their 2000 AASA study, they found that female superintendents had been classroom teachers longer than males. Like Glass et al. (2000), Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) also found when they conducted their 2010 AASA study that female superintendents had worked as classroom teachers longer than male superintendents. Therefore, it is no surprise that females become superintendents at an older age than men (Kowalski et al., 2011). When Kowalski et al. (2011) conducted their study of American superintendents, they found that only 4.4 percent of women became superintendents by or before age 36 whereas 16.4

percent of males became superintendents by or before age 36. Kowalski et al. (2011) further stated that 30.6 percent of female superintendents reached that position by age 45, while 50 percent of male superintendents achieved that position by age 45.

Concomitantly with the superintendency reflecting a less female population, white males make up most of the population of superintendents (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). In fact, when conducting their 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency, Glass et al. (2000) posited “this study like those released in 1982 and 1992, found that the vast majority (94.9) percent of American superintendents are white, and 86.6 percent are male” (p. 15). Subsequently, Brunner and Grogan (2007) emphasized “the superintendency is one of the most heavily white and masculinized roles in our culture” (p. 12). They added “while the current culture of teaching is feminized, throughout history the culture of educational administration-in particular, the superintendency- has been and is masculinized” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, pp. 12-13). With this in mind, DiCanio et al. (2016) asserted that “although women make up a larger portion of the teaching profession, men were 40 times more likely to become superintendents as compared to women” (p. 68). Additionally, when analyzing the 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency, Sherman et al. (2008) found that “women superintendents are also more likely (56.8) percent to hold a doctoral degree in education or philosophy, while only 43.7 percent of their male counterparts are equally educated” (p. 242). Like Glass et al. (2000), Kowalski et al. (2007) also found more female superintendents had earned doctorate degrees. Although female superintendents have earned more doctorate degrees than their male counterparts, females are becoming



superintendents at a growth rate of only 0.7 percent yearly (Wallace, 2015). The gains in females obtaining superintendencies have been modest.

**Challenges of female superintendents.** Women have come a long way from working only as office clerks to now also working as administrators. Although performing various administrative roles, now women act as administrators in central office and work as superintendents. Superintendents are among the most important employees in central offices in local education agencies as they are responsible for overseeing the success of the school system. Their roles and responsibilities differ among the various local education agencies. Their responsibilities range from being the chief executive officer to also being specialists in overseeing instructional improvement. According to Sherman et al. (2008), the superintendent “initiates, implements and promotes the district’s vision toward achieving academic success of all of its students, evaluates student achievement, takes a crucial part in selecting principals and serves as liason between the school board and school community” (p. 242) thus is responsible for overseeing the success of the school district. Although the position of superintendent seems to be one of prestige, it comes with adversity and challenges and for women, what is known as the glass ceiling. According to Scherr (1995), the glass ceiling is “an image representing obstacles that prevent women from advancing to the top of their careers. Although women have a full view of the top of the organization, they bump against an invisible shield of resistance and can rise no further” (p. 313).

Thus, the focus of this section is to discuss the many challenges of female superintendents. Female superintendents face challenges that consist of cultural and political barriers and lack of access to formal mentoring programs.

**Cultural barriers.** One challenge female superintendents face is cultural barriers. According to Sherman et al. (2008), culture impacts women becoming leaders. For example, one cultural assumption is that men are better and more effective leaders (DiCanio et al., 2016; Sherman et al., 2008). DiCanio et al. (2016) added that men are portrayed as better disciplinarians and better communicators with the board when handling overall politics. This cultural assumption makes female career advancement more complicated (Sherman et al., 2008). In addition, the expectations for women are often unequal to those of men in regards to family responsibilities (Sherman et al., 2008). It is presumed that women are caretakers of the children while men are the leaders and administrators (DiCanio et al., 2016; Washington, Miller, & Fiene, 2007). Indeed, family and childcare responsibilities are a barrier for women in administration (Shakeshaft, 1985; Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). For example, the Hispanic culture believes women should be at home taking care of children although they have careers (Sherman et al., 2008). In an analysis of narratives highlighting experiences, Sherman et al. (2008) found the Hispanic culture relies on the mother to make time for daily family duties including cooking daily.

Indeed, there are other examples of literature that reflect the domestic barrier. In the study conducted by Sherman et al. (2008), one participant revealed “women are expected to do certain things, in certain cultures, and to be a leader of a school district is just not one of them” (p. 250). The study also found that male administrators usually are married and rely on their wives to take care of the house responsibilities (chores, children, performing the transactions for bill paying, and selling and buying the house) while women do not have this support system (Sherman et al., 2008). Similarly, Reed

and Patterson (2007) found that women are “more likely to have domestic chores” (p. 91). Furthermore, McCreight (1999) found that female administrators encountered more barriers because of gender in regards to family. Women do not have the support from husbands that male superintendents receive from their spouses (McCreight, 1999). As a matter of fact, “nearly all male superintendents enter the superintendency married, but female superintendents are much more likely to be single, widowed, divorced, or to have commuter marriages” (McCreight, 1999, p. 4). Gupton and Slick (1995) found “close to a third of the women in top administrative positions have been divorced at least once” (p. 19). Concomitantly, Sherman et al. (2008) found that it is more likely for female superintendents to be single as opposed to male superintendents. Like Sherman et al. (2008), McCreight (1999) posited male administrators usually have wives who take care of the house and the children. However, female administrators are expected to continue to take care of the house and children (McCreight, 1999).

In addition to the family cultural barrier, the lack of women mentors also serves as another cultural boundary (Sherman et al. 2008). Indeed, there is a shortage of available mentors for female administrators (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1985; Sherman et al., 2008). In fact, Sherman et al. (2008) found the lack of female mentors is a larger cultural boundary than the cultural expectations of work and family. Sherman et al. (2008) found that women had been denied being mentors because they had not accumulated the necessary years of experience to be deemed a mentor. Furthermore, female mentors are deprived of being labeled mentors because they do not have the experience due to never receiving the opportunity to be an administrator, although they have the qualifications and have applied (Sherman et al., 2008). However, it just maybe

that faulty networking is in place, i.e. the “good ole boy buddy system” (Polka, Litchka, & Davis, 2008; Sherman et al., 2008). Furthermore, women may have missed the opportunity for career advancement because they simply did not know of the job opening (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Sherman et al., 2008). As Sherman et al. (2008) discussed this cultural boundary, they found that one source of power is information power, and this can keep women from advancing because they may not know of an opportunity or they have been misinformed.

**Political barriers.** In addition to cultural boundaries, female superintendents also face challenges in the form of political barriers that include the “good ole boy buddy system” (Polka, et al., 2008; Sherman et al., 2008). The good ole boy buddy system is a political barrier that women commonly face in terms of career advancement (McGee, 2010; Sharpe, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004). According to McGee (2010), the old boy’s network is “an invisible network of sponsorship whereby older professionals groom younger versions of themselves for leadership positions” (p. 14). Furthermore, Sherman, Munoz, and Pankake (2008) added the good old boy network consists of “older male executives and male professors who typically prefer protégés who are junior versions of themselves” (p. 245). For example, older white men will mentor younger white men to groom them into administrative positions thus advancing their career. Polka, Litchka, and Davis (2003) agreed, professing the existence of the good ‘ole boy and buddy system network.

Similarly, Sherman et al. (2008) mentioned the old boy network in their research of women’s mentoring experiences, highlighting that women should be aware of its existence and the power of this network. Additionally, respondents in Grogan’s (1996)

survey professed the existence of the good “old-boy’s network” (p. 74) and asserted that denying its existence is a mistake and naivety. Likewise, respondents in Gupton and Slick’s (1996) survey professed the existence of the “good old boy” (p. xxviii) system. As a matter of fact, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found that 74 percent of women knew the good “old boy/girl network” (p. 91) existed and this indeed was responsible for an administrator getting a superintendent job in the 2003 AASA study. Additionally, Polka et al., (2008) found a political barrier to career advancement is the presence of the buddy system. They describe this buddy system as males referring males, thereby placing other males in these key administrative job roles (Polka et al., 2008). In a study of female administrators in Georgia, Polka et al. (2008) found the buddy system was listed as a top political barrier to career advancement for women. Additionally, McGee (2010) conducted a study of Florida’s female administrators and found that women administrators listed “politics/good ole boy network” (p. 9) as the common political barrier to career advancement.

McGee (2010) found there are numerous factors that contribute to politics being the most common barrier to career advancement of female administrators. According to McGee (2010), women are not in these networks in which men are members. McGee (2010) further found the importance of social capital exclaiming “social capital is even more necessary to a manager’s advancement than skillful performance of traditional managerial tasks” (p. 14). McGee (2010) posited since networking usually does not happen during work hours, women who have families cannot frequently take advantage of these opportunities as men do. She further asserted that the good ole boy network may be unknown to women, keeping them from advancing their career (McGee, 2010). In a

survey conducted by McGee (2010), she found survey respondents revealed that although the good ole boy network existed and they did not fit in this network, but they still did not give up (McGee, 2010). Instead, they realized the role politics played and ended up acquiring the positions (McGee, 2010). However, it did take perseverance to beat politics. Political barriers must be recognized to be able to control them (McGee, 2010).

The presence of politics in regards to the good ole boy buddy system has contributed to school central office administrative positions being largely dominated by men. According to Sherman, Munoz, and Pankake (2008), the superintendency is predominately a male occupation. Sherman et al. (2008) added if the school board is not looking for a woman, the female resumes and applications will be put aside and not even given consideration. Moreover, DiCanio et al. (2016) added that school boards look for men to fill the superintendency position as opposed to women. Sherman et al. (2008) found although women had obtained their credentials and were equally as qualified as males, they were still questioned about being ready to advance.

**Resilience of female leaders.** Additionally, the “professional victim syndrome” (Polka et al., 2008) is a political barrier to female administrators. The professional victim syndrome impacts the position of women in power as it has a political impact on their leadership. The professional victim syndrome is defined as

the condition confronted by many educational leaders...who faced a career crisis in which his/her professional and personal reputation was being tarnished, and he/she had the challenge of navigating the political waves in order to survive, literally and figuratively, as a leader and a person. (Polka et al., 2008, p. 296)

Patterson (2003) asserted this pressure includes being “attacked directly in an attempt to shift the debate to...character and style” (p. 67) in an attempt to avoid change. As a matter of fact, Polka et al. (2008) found that more women experience this syndrome than males.

Polka et al. (2008) further stated the female administrators must be able to address both personal and professional challenges associated with their career; the female administrators can be resilient if they possess the necessary tools to defeat the challenges of being female in that position. Reed and Patterson (2007) defined resilience as “using energy productively within a school environment to achieve goals in the face of adverse conditions” (p. 89). When describing resilience, DiCanio et al. (2016) asserted “leadership resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity, enables women to take risks regardless of criticism and challenges” (p. 68). They go on to further state that superintendents must have “stamina to sustain challenges” (DiCanio et al., 2016).

Additionally, Polka et al. (2008) emphasized the political nature of the position must be dealt with and addressed; ignoring it will not make it go away. Patterson (2003) professed politics in organizations is an inevitable reality and leaders should never underestimate the role of power of politics. Furthermore, Polka et al. (2008) added that practicing the five dispositions (challenge, commitment, control, creativity, and caring) will help build the resilience of female administrators. Additionally, Polka et al. (2008) proposed that becoming familiar with the five dispositions will enable female administrators to address the political nature of the job. Reed and Patterson (2007) conducted a study of female superintendents in New York and found resilient female superintendents let values drive their decisions, considered all information before making

decisions, found the good in bad situations, had a support network, and remained courageous about their beliefs while learning from mistakes. Reed and Patterson (2007) further found that being focused on beliefs about what matters, expecting the unexpected while remaining calm in adversity, and remaining optimistic and positive helped female superintendents remain resilient. Lastly, Polka et al. (2008) found that mentoring is a great way of dealing with the professional victim syndrome political barrier because mentoring provides for networking opportunities that allow for personal and professional growth.

### **Assistant Superintendents of Schools**

According to Bruner and Grogan (2007), the administrative role of assistant superintendent at the central office is the last step prior to becoming a superintendent. Assistant superintendents of schools are very important to the success of operations at Central Office. There are many pathways to the position of assistant superintendent. Hunter (2013) found that assistant superintendents had been coordinators, directors, principals, and assistant principals prior to becoming assistant superintendents. Additionally, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found when examining the 2003 National Survey of Superintendents and Central Office Administrators that over half of current superintendents had been assistant superintendents prior to becoming superintendent.

The assistant superintendent position can be a pipeline to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Leach, 2009). Although a pipeline to the superintendency, assistant female superintendents can experience the glass ceiling when striving to become superintendent (Gupton & Slick, 1995). The position of assistant superintendent is a male dominated position (Sherman et al., 2008). Although it is male dominated, both



male and female assistant superintendents agree they encounter external and internal barriers when pursuing the superintendency. When Hunter (2013) conducted a study of New York's assistant superintendents in Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties, she found external barriers experienced by assistant superintendents included "high turnover rate, the 'excessive time commitment' required, inadequate pay, age bias, school boards, search firm bias, budget cuts, state and federal mandates, and gender and race bias" (p. 171). When pursuing the superintendency, Hunter (2013) further found the internal barriers experienced by assistant superintendents consisted of inadequate preparation, lack of interest, doubting self-competence and inner qualities such, as the ability to be an honest superintendent. Another barrier listed was that the superintendency is a thankless job due to politics interfering with the superintendent's decisions and job roles and responsibilities (Hunter, 2013).

Second in charge, assistant superintendents can have many roles and responsibilities. Their roles and responsibilities differ among the various local education agencies. Their job assignments can consist of supervising multiple staff to being responsible for evaluating the principals of the local schools. When Hunter (2013) conducted a study of assistant superintendents, she found that assistant superintendent positions vary to include "assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent of business and finance, assistant superintendent of human resources, assistant superintendent of personnel, assistant superintendent of operations, and assistant superintendent of special education" (p. 136). Brunner and Grogan (2007) found there were assistant superintendents of "administration or support services" (p. 49). Although there are several assistant superintendent positions, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found

that assistant superintendents of curriculum and instruction have valuable learning experiences that make them more suitable applicants for the superintendency. Although the position of assistant superintendent seems to be one of prestige, it comes with adversity and challenges. Thus the focus of this section is to discuss the role of both male and female assistant superintendents, the challenges of male and female assistant superintendents, and the mentoring needs of both male and female superintendents.

**Male assistant superintendents.** Male assistant superintendents are responsible for several roles at Central Office. Of the male assistant superintendents who participated in the survey conducted by Hunter (2013), the males identified themselves in one of the following categories of “curriculum and instruction, business and finance, human resources, personnel, operations, special education, and other” (p. 136). According to Sherman et al. (2008), the position of assistant superintendent is predominately a male occupation. When Hunter (2013) conducted a study of male and female assistant superintendents, she found males are more likely to apply for the superintendency. Leach (2009) found males are more interested in the superintendency. Status, power, salary raise, and possible job relocations attract males to the superintendency (Hunter 2013).

In spite of the attractions to the superintendency, male assistant superintendents do experience challenges. When analyzing the 2003 American Association of School Superintendents (AASA) study of male assistant superintendent responses, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found male administrators identify “inadequate financing of schools, too many insignificant demands, state reform mandates, and board micromanagement” (p.93) as challenges. In addition to challenges of male assistant superintendents, there are mentoring needs for male assistant superintendents. Male assistant superintendents

desire a more structured mentoring relationship (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). When Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) conducted a survey of superintendents and novice principals, they found that when males were mentored by women, the males preferred more structured conversation versus relationship building in their mentoring relationships. In other words, they preferred to have male mentors because they desired more structured conversations and meetings. Lastly, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found more males were hired to be “managerial leaders” (p.94).

**Female assistant superintendents.** Like male assistant superintendents, female assistant superintendents have multiple responsibilities at Central Office. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) found that female assistant superintendents who oversee curriculum, instruction, and assessment have the experiences needed to pursue the superintendency, thus have a better chance at successfully obtaining a superintendent’s position. However, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found that female assistant superintendents who have exposure to other tasks and are involved with helping oversee the whole district just as the superintendent, receive key experiences needed to pursue the superintendency.

The position of assistant superintendent should create an automatic pool of motivated candidates to aspire to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). However, when Brunner and Grogan (2007) analyzed the 2003 American Association of School Superintendents (AASA) study of female assistant superintendents, they found there were assistant superintendents who aspired to the superintendency and those assistant superintendents who had no aspirations of acquiring a superintendent’s position. Brunner and Grogan (2007) further found that 60 percent of assistant superintendent respondents had no desire to pursue a superintendency. Female assistant superintendents

who had no aspirations of acquiring a superintendent's job listed the following as reasons for not aspiring to the superintendency: they were content with their current jobs as assistant superintendents, did not like the politics involved with the superintendent's job, "too much stress" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 79), and salary does not pay enough for what the job demands. Additionally, Leach (2009) posited that the superintendent's hectic schedule with frequent late meetings and evening functions that minimize family time are other reasons why female assistant superintendents do not aspire to the superintendency. When Glesson and Knights (2008) conducted a study of middle managers who worked in four colleges in England's midland regions, women respondents disclosed they were not interested in advancing their career due to the lack of desire to work long hours and seldom being rewarded for going above and beyond to what they referred to as "the blind eye" (p. 13) and what Sharp, Malone, and Walter (2002) referred to as a "thankless job" (p. 4). Furthermore, Hunter (2013) added "discriminatory acts" (p. 144) such as bias when appointing a superintendent, gender, family responsibilities, and lack of mentors are other reasons why assistant superintendents do not pursue the superintendency. Female assistant superintendents who aspired to the superintendency desired so because they desired "achievement, power, affiliation, importance, and influence" (Hunter, p. 78).

It is not uncommon for female assistant superintendents to have secured their position via networks or sponsors (Gupton & Slick, 1996). For instance, Grogan (1996) found that a large number of female administrators knew their hiring male superintendents prior to receiving the assistant superintendent position. Furthermore, Brunner and Grogan (2007) asserted that the "old girl/boy network" (p. 54) is the reason

for administrators obtaining central office promotions. When DiCanio et al. (2016) discussed the importance of networks and sponsors, they asserted sponsors help create networks needed to obtain positions. Likewise, when analyzing the 2003 AASA study, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found that over half of assistant superintendents got their job via the good old boy/girl network. In some instances, females used their own good old girl and boy networks to their advantage when in other instances, the lack of these networks was a barrier; it seems that some women have figured it out and others have not. Additionally, the majority of assistant superintendents had male mentors who helped them obtain their assistant superintendent job (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Kowalski and Stouder (1999) referred to this as being “advantaged applicants” (p. 5). Indeed, mentoring proved to contribute to career advancement (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Freely & Seinfeld, 2012; McGee, 2010; Noe, 1988; Pavan & Robinson, 1991; Sherman et al., 2008).

Like male assistant superintendents, female assistant superintendents also experience challenges. When Brunner and Grogan (2007) conducted their study of female assistant superintendents, they found one challenge female assistant superintendents face is the lack of mobility when aspiring to the superintendency. They further found that female assistant superintendents do not have their own professional organization to join that would enable more networking opportunities (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Additionally, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found that challenges that affected their ability to be successful on the job were “too many insignificant demands; too much added responsibility; and inadequate financing of schools” (p. 57). Lastly, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found that other challenges consisted of the existence of the

good old boy/girl network; the glass ceiling; lack of access to key experiences; lack of sponsorship and role models; family responsibilities; perceptions of female characteristics in which women are perceived to be weak, emotional, poor decision makers, lack of ability to maintain finances and budget; and stigma and resentment from others.

**Administrator mentoring supports.** In addition to female assistant superintendents experiencing challenges, they also have mentoring needs. Mentoring enables career advancement (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Freely & Seinfeld, 2012; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; McGee, 2010; & Sherman et al., 2008). Additionally, mentoring relationships include opportunities for career advancement (Bynum, 2015; Eby et al., 2007; Haggard et al., 2011; and McGee, 2010). As mentors provide suggestions for career advancement, they provide reassurance to their protégés that they can move up the career ladder, thus leading to career promotion (McGee, 2010). Furthermore, Sherman et al. (2008) added that mentoring provides opportunities to improve female representation in educational administration.

Female assistant superintendents also have mentoring needs for developing themselves individually and promoting productive relationships. Mentoring programs should include adequate training and outlining goals and responsibilities of the mentor and the mentee (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006). Mentoring benefits both the mentor and mentee (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005; Eby et al., 2007; Haggard et al, 2011; and Zachary & Fischler, 2009). Mentoring also helps with career development when the mentor sponsors the individual and coaches him

or her (Eby et al., 2007; Haggard et al., 2011). The mentor provides learning opportunities and experiences to help improve leadership skills (Zachary & Fischler, 2009). According to Sherman et al. (2008), mentoring helps novices advance to the next level in the administrative chain. Furthermore, McGee (2010) found that mentoring provides “encouragement and confidence” (p. 18). Concomitantly, when Brunner and Grogan (2007) analyzed the 2003 AASA study, they found that “mentoring can make a significant difference in whether a woman feels prepared to become a superintendent” (p. 54).

According to Eby et al. (2007), the mentor acts as a role model, coach, and sponsor who provides opportunities for growth and development by providing exposure and networking to other opportunities, counseling and feedback, support, and friendship. Similarly Bynum (2015) posited the mentor is more experienced and provides assistance by way of offering support and resources to help the mentee develop personally and professionally. Furthermore, the mentor listens as the mentee shares concerns. The mentor is charged with acclimating the mentees to other administrators (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Additionally, mentors help novices meet their professional development needs by becoming affiliated with the requirements of their new career (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). According to Alsbury and Hackmann (2006), mentoring ensures the mentee’s needs are met through conversations and content delivery.

Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) posited that mentoring provides support to novices by encouraging effective decision making and problem solving. Likewise, Sherman et al. (2008) found mentoring promotes valuable “support, information, problem solving, and camaraderie” (p. 245) with current superintendents and former colleagues. Alsbury

and Hackmann (2006) contended mentors should “encourage novices to undertake challenging and risk-taking activities they may otherwise avoid, increase novices’ confidence and competence, and help diminish role ambiguity” (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006, p. 171).

According to Bonner, Koch, and Langmeyer (2004), it is important to promote productive relationships. In a study conducted of the Iowa Mentoring Program, Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) found relationships are very important in successful mentoring. To ensure a productive relationship, when assigning mentors to protégés, program directors should take into consideration the protégés need for “more/less structure and for nurturing relationships” (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006, p. 184). Benefits of this relationship include access to encouragement, thus increased confidence (McGee 2010), and the provision of several opportunities for experience, growth, and learning while enhancing the leadership abilities of the mentee (Zachary & Fischler, 2009). These relationships can be “compared to parent-child, friend-friend, teacher-student, counselor-client, and spiritual adviser-follower relationships” (Eby et al., 2007, p. 8). According to Haggard et al. (2011), mentoring relationships have two functions which are career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions prepare mentees for career advancement while learning the job in the organization and include “sponsorship, exposure and visibility, and coaching” (Eby et al., 2007. p.14). Psychosocial functions help mentees “develop a sense of competence and identity as a professional and occur through the provision of acceptance and confirmation, counseling, role modeling, and friendship” (Eby et al., 2007. p.14).



These relationships help meet the individual's need for social interaction. Due to their new career status, there may be few opportunities for new administrators to interact with others. Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) found administrators new to the profession had need for socialization due to having little or no system of support. They added that this unavailability of support leads to further isolation and they receive little or no feedback on their job performance (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Additionally, Sherman et al. (2008) expressed that providing emotional support should be included in the socialization aspect of mentoring. They state that having someone to talk to provides a degree of emotional support and comfort for the mentees (Sherman et al., 2008). According to Alsbury and Hackmann (2006), mentoring relationships are designed to ensure the mentee's needs are met through conversations and content delivery.

Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) further asserted that mentoring helps increase the mentee's awareness of potential job openings, promotes the beginning of blossoming relationships with peers and colleagues, and creates relationships with other administrators in other areas. When Sherman et al. (2008) analyzed data in two research studies, they found mentoring opened a gateway into administration for female administrators, thus serving as a pathway through which a career in administration began. McGee (2010) found mentoring gives access to social interactions outside of work. Additionally, Polka et al. (2008) conducted a study and found that mentoring can aid in survival and promote resiliency for those in the superintendency. Furthermore, forming the mentoring relationship will establish a support system for superintendents to deal with the stress associated with the position. Equally important, Sherman et al., (2008) asserted that these relationships encourage mentees in furthering their education and applying for

promotions. Moreover, Bynum (2015) affirmed that networking should be supportive and available.

In conclusion, more women work as assistant superintendents in local education agencies' central offices than in past decades. Female assistant superintendents have several roles and responsibilities. Female assistant superintendents are faced with challenges and have mentoring needs. Thus this section has focused on the many challenges of cultural and political barriers and mentoring needs that consist of developing the individual and promoting productive relationships of female assistant superintendents.

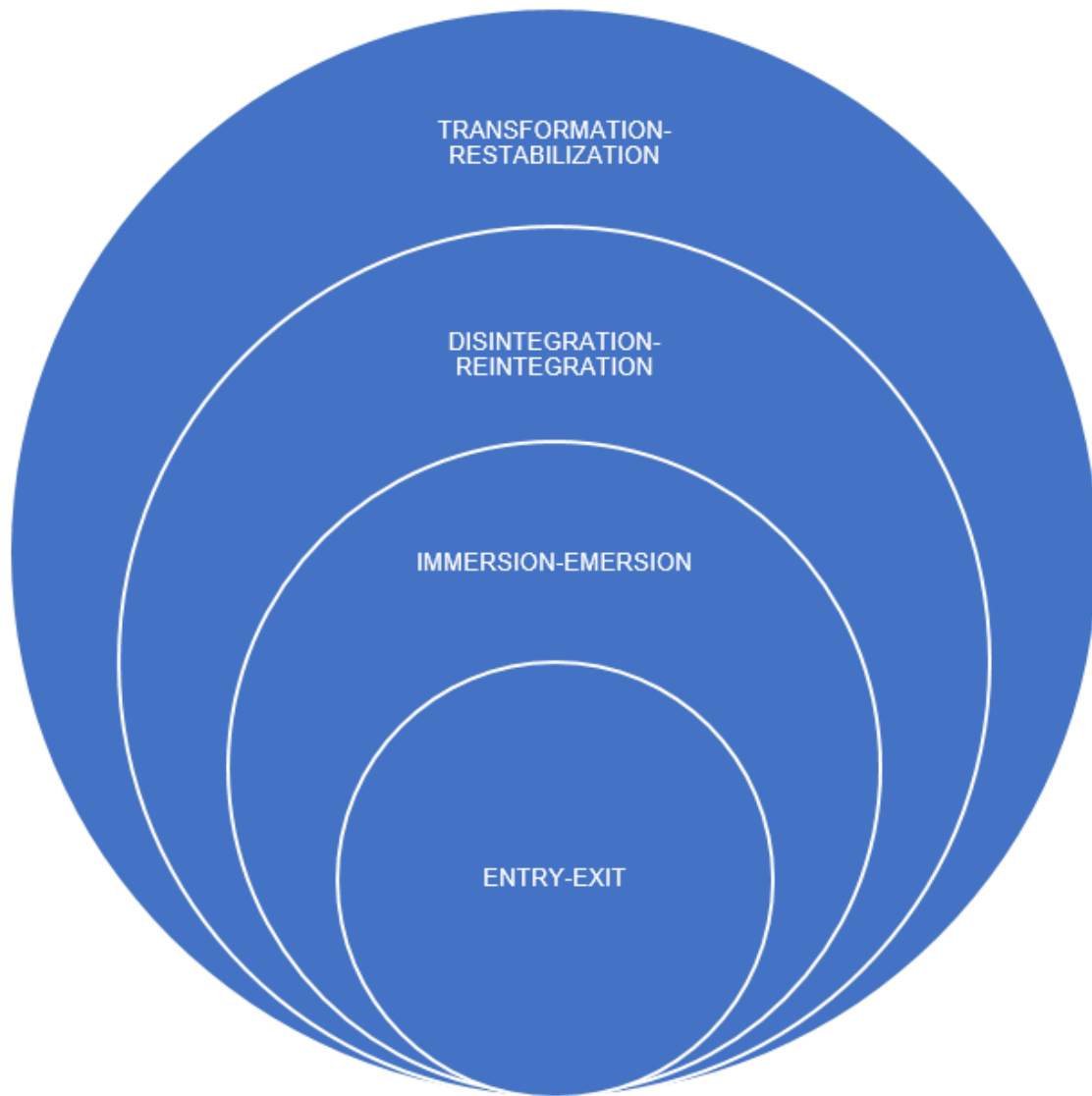
### **Conceptual Framework: Middle Space Leadership**

Increasingly, women act as middle space leaders in their middle management positions as assistant superintendents. When Kowaski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) analyzed the 2010 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) study, they found that of the 430 female superintendents participating in this study of 1,867 superintendents, 50 percent had been assistant superintendents prior to becoming superintendent. As assistant superintendents fall between senior management and lower level workers, their role as middle space leaders is important. In fact, when Oshry (1994) referred to managers in middle space as "middles," he found they have two functions. First, they function as managers who oversee their specific areas (Oshry, 1994). Secondly, they also function as system integrators in which they integrate and network with their peers and colleagues (Oshry, 1994). It is managers in middle space who work to keep things in perspective and in balance with upper management and lower

workers (Oshry, 1993). Trying to satisfy upper management and lower level workers, middle space leaders must understand the middle space and its unique challenges.

According to Armstrong (2009), middle space is used to describe the location of middle managers in the organization. When describing middle space leadership, Armstrong (2009) posited “the concept of ‘middle space’ is also consistent with the ‘betwixt and between’ or liminal feelings of disequilibrium and dislocation that characterize transitional neutral zones and passages” (p. 79). When Armstrong (2009) explored the experiences of assistant principals as middle space leaders, she found that assistant principals go through a series of passages when transitioning from teachers to middle space leaders as assistant principals. She developed a framework that represents the passages of these middle space leaders (Armstrong, 2009) depicting four phases that these middle space leaders pass through as they transition into the assistant principal’s role (Armstrong, 2009). Armstrong (2009) labeled these passages as entry-exit, immersion-emersion, disintegration-reintegration, and transformation-re-stabilization which reflect the experiences of the middle space leaders (see Figure 1).

Representing the transition from one career to another, entry-exit represents entering middle space leadership while simultaneously exiting the teacher profession (Armstrong, 2009). In addition to entry-exit, immersion-emersion is characterized by an examination of the beginnings of middle space as the participants reflect on their experiences of being thrust into this new middle space role with no prior training (Armstrong, 2009). Oshry (1993) also found that it is typical for middle space managers to be thrust in middle space positions without any previous or prior training that focuses on managing in middle space.



*Figure 1.* Passages that reflect middle space leaders' experience. (From *Administrative Passages: Navigating the Transition from Teacher to Assistant Principal* (p. 62), by D.E. Armstrong, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer. Copyright 2009 by Springer Science+ Business Media.)

In addition to entry-exit and immersion-emersion, disintegration-reintegration symbolizes the third passage. Dismissing old ways, disintegration-reintegration involves finding new ways to act in the new role which include developing new skills and relationships that will help the middle space leader succeed in the new role (Armstrong, 2009). Armstrong (2009) added middle space leaders experience loneliness and isolation

due to no longer identifying with others the same way prior to being a middle space leader because they are no longer in the same social circles. As a matter of fact, Oshry (1993) posited middle space leaders must understand new skills to be able to go from dis-integration to integration, independence, and middle power. Furthermore, Oshry (1993) added middles who integrate become a powerful force by developing support networks, providing leadership, and lightening upper management's load by enabling them to focus on completing their job. Lastly, transformation-re-stabilization is the culmination of the progression whereas the experiences of the middle space leader have now led to increased competence and confidence in the new role (Armstrong, 2009). Moreover, Oshry (1994) professed increased knowledge and competence contributes to middle space power as middles are better able to make good decisions from having access to all information needed. Thus, middle space managers are able to carry out the job more successfully as they feel they make a significant contribution to the organization (Oshry, 1994).

Armstrong (2009) added Oshry's middle space refers to the "psychological and social phenomena" (p. 79) that emerges during the transition to the new administrative middle manager's position. According to Oshry (1993), "whoever enters middle space is caught between the conflicting agendas, perspectives, priorities, needs, and demands of two or more individuals or groups" (p. 402). In fact, Oshry (1993) found middle spaces can exist between vertical and lateral pressures. Vertical pressures refer to middles as existing between their managers and work groups whereas lateral pressures refer to middles that exist between a liaison and customers and producers (Oshry, 1993). There can also be a combination of both vertical and lateral pressures (Oshry, 1993). Oshry

(1993) further stated middle space represents his belief of where middle managers lie between top and bottom workers in the organization. According to Oshry (1994), these middle managers are in the middle of top and bottom workers in a middle space that can be located in a personally dis-integrating space but can be empowering if it is understood and managed. The goal of middle space management is to go from dis-integration to independence, integration, and power (Oshry, 1994). Additionally, when Armstrong (2009) discussed the middle space, she asserted the middle manager is caught in middle space in the “organizational hierarchy” (p. 79) between senior management and lower-level workers.

The concept of middle managers obtained its beginnings in the United States. According to Uytterhoeven (1989), when organizations began to focus more on divisionalization, there became a growing need for middle managers. Because of divisionalization, middle managers may be younger than their 30's and may face resentment due to their age and not establishing seniority before becoming middle managers (Uytterhoeven, 1989). This resentment may be the result of advancing in their career early as middle manager, thus being known as the “educated elite” (Uytterhoeven, 1989, p. 142). On the other hand, if followers are not cooperative, they may jeopardize the work or middle manager's progress in accomplishing the goal (Uytterhoeven, 1989). Uytterhoeven (1989) added when middle managers begin working in their new departments, they have to form relationships with the lower level workers to be successful, learning the informal structure of the organization that may not be written. Uytterhoeven (1989) posited that middle managers' leadership will be more effective if they are leading the followers with their consent. Uytterhoeven (1989) described the

middle manager as “a general manager who is responsible for a particular business unit at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy” (p. 136). Middle managers are in between the senior management and the lower level workers (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Davidson and Goldberg (2005) added that middle managers must report to bosses while simultaneously managing staff.

Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, and Turner (2007) echoed that “middle leaders are those people who hold middle ranking posts...being neither senior leaders...nor junior staff” (p. 405). Furthermore, Clegg and McAuley (2005) purported that middle managers are in between the senior management and the lower level workers. Cawthorne (2010) added that middle managers are in leadership positions and work in the “middle tier of management” and “influence decision making” (p. 151). Armstrong (2010) stated that middle managers experience “technical, emotional, and socio-emotional challenges” (p. 121) while in middle space. She stated middle managers experience “psychological and moral ambiguities” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 121) as well as stakeholder demands.

Middle leaders have several roles (Busher et al., 2007). When Gleeson and Knights (2008) conducted a study of middle managers in four colleges in England’s Midland Regions, they found that middle managers wear many hats and the middle manager’s role is a complex one. According to Uytterhoeven (1989), middle managers wear three hats. They act as subordinates, superiors, and equals. When Briggs (2001) conducted a case study in English Further Education Colleges, he found that middle managers also act in a liason role. Furthermore, middle managers promote cohesiveness among the upper management and the lower levels of workers thus bridging upper management and workers (Buscher et al. 2007; Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Thomas-

Gregory, 2014). In addition to bridging the two organizational levels, middle managers act as a buffer between upper management and employees (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). When Armstrong (2010) conducted a study of secondary assistant principals, she found that these middle space leaders also acted as boundary spanners and buffers. Boundary spanners observe the external environment looking for any changes that might upset the balance and buffers protect the organization “from external threats” (p. 123). Boundary spanners also find and collect information and data to use within the school system to help improve the organization (Honig, 2008). Additionally, Briggs (2001) asserted middle managers foster collaboration between upper level management and lower level workers.

According to Uytterhoeven (1989), middle managers have three tasks which include acting upward, downward, and laterally. When middle managers act upward, they function as subordinates as “they take orders” (Uytterhoeven, 1989, p. 137) from their bosses. Kelley (1988) refers to this as being a good follower. When middle managers function downward, they act as superiors as “they give orders” (Uytterhoeven, 1989, p. 137). According to Boomgaarden (2008), middle managers must be courageous when managing others as “timidity, fear, and anxiety undermine what little authority” (p. 4) they have. Boomgaarden (2008) further found that realizing the importance of all workers, understanding all aspects of problems before attempting to solve them, and the ability to put things in perspective is instrumental when acting as a middle manager.

In addition to acting upward and downward, middle managers act laterally when they act as peers and are seen as equals by some in the organization (Uytterhoeven, 1989). According to Uytterhoeven (1989), middle managers have a demanding position as they



must be able to juggle all three positional roles. When Armstrong (2009) conducted a study of administrative middle managers, she found their jobs to be characterized by several demands and increasing workloads accompanied by feelings of being overwhelmed. Uytterhoeven (1989) added they must know how to change hats and balance all roles. Furthermore, they have a dual role in that they both delegate and do (perform tasks). According Uytterhoeven (1989) middle managers are “both delegators and doers” and “both coaches and players” (p. 138). Middle managers must be able to inspire others while realizing that others are looking at them with a “magnifying glass” (Armstrong, 2005, p. 120) as they are looked to be the “the calm in the storm” (Boomgaarden, 2008, p. 4). The ability to delegate roles can decrease the middle manager’s feelings of being overwhelmed. Middle managers tend to experience feelings of being overwhelmed (Pepper & Giles, 2015; Thomas-Gregory, 2014). Uytterhoeven (1989) purported middle managers have to balance roles which require knowing when to delegate and when to get involved getting things done by themselves. Additionally, Uytterhoeven (1989) suggested that middle managers must know how to interpret the goals and vision of the boss and the operation to the workers or subordinates to get the job done. Should a problem arise, Boomgaarden (2008) suggested middle managers must know how to take care of the problem before it gets to the boss. Uytterhoeven (1989) suggested middle managers must deal with the politics and must rely on others and relationships to get the job done thus increasing their vulnerability “to sabotage” (p. 140).

In addition to having several roles, middle managers also participate in shared leadership with upper management. Cawthorne (2010) found shared leadership between middle managers and upper level management ensures shared decision making and

accountability and leads to the organization achieving its goals and vision. In addition to Cawthorne's findings, Dopson, Risk, and Stewart (1996) conducted case studies of middle managers in the United Kingdom and found that middle managers were closer to senior management as they also aid in the organization's strategic operations. Farrell (2014) echoed this sentiment stating middle managers are responsible for ensuring the success of their superiors. When Cawthorne (2010) surveyed library middle managers, he found they worked closely with the workers below top management and frequently communicated with senior management regarding any issues or questions from these workers and communicated progress of accomplishing strategic plans and goals. Furthermore, Cawthorne (2010) found middle managers can have an impact on accomplishing desired change in the organization when upper management and middle managers work closely together, thus promoting "frontline empowerment" (p. 151). Frontline empowerment refers to improved "communication, coordination, and accountability" (Cawthorne, 2010, p. 151). In addition to promoting frontline empowerment, Busher et al. (2007) found middle managers engage in distributed and transformational leadership with their followers. When Busher et al. (2007) reviewed literature of middle leaders in England and Wales Secondary and Primary Schools, they found that middle leaders "foster positive interpersonal relationships" (p. 10) and promote shared decision making.

Additionally, Cawthorne (2010) found that middle managers who engage in shared leadership also engage in co-leadership and self-leadership. Middle managers are responsible for helping lead the organization and themselves while simultaneously being good followers (Cawthorne, 2010). Kelley (1988) described good followers as people

who have the vision to “see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, [and] the strength of character” (p. 147). Kelley (1988) insisted that “good leaders know how to follow and they set an example for others” (p. 147).

Often, middle managers do not have the luxury to make decisions. Indeed, middle managers have limited authority (Uyterhoeven, 1989). According to Uyterhoeven (1989), middle managers “cannot always make quick decisions, a straightforward course of action, or follow completely rational and logical solutions” (p. 145). When Armstrong (2009) conducted her study of assistant principals, she found that these middle managers did not have the power they thought; instead, they had what one respondent referred to as “the so-called power” (p. 88) due to having decisions often overturned by their superintendents or principals. As a matter of fact, one respondent revealed that as an assistant in a middle manager position, he/she never had “the final word” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 23). This same sentiment was expressed in the 2005 study conducted by Armstrong as a respondent reflected on having decisions often overturned by senior management which led to the respondent’s feelings of powerlessness.

Additionally, this limited decision making can lead to feelings of being in someone else’s shadow. Armstrong (2010) found that these middle manager assistants’ role in the leader’s shadow “places them in an unstable psychological and professional middle space” (p.23). According to Clegg and McAuley (2005), the only way middle managers can have “considerable power” is by working in organizations that allow for them to be “at the heart of affairs (physically and emotionally) and promote innovation, shared decision making, and problem-solving” (p. 21). However, there are personality traits that middle managers possess that promote resilience. When Thomas-Gregory

(2014) conducted a study of middle managers in the school of healthcare in a Chartered United Kingdom University, participants revealed their ability to be curious, competitive, optimistic, sociable, and having a sense of humor contributed to their resilience and success.

### **Summary**

The female assistant superintendent in a school district is most likely on a pathway to the superintendency. As this is a central office position that is located in middle space leadership, the assistant superintendency places the assistant superintendent in a management role between the superintendent and the lower level local education agency workers. As the nexus of leadership of school districts, central office plays an important role in accountability and instructional improvement while it functions as a learning organization, establishes assistance relationships, and serves as a boundary spanner. While female assistant superintendents are located at central office, they are immersed in middle space leadership as middle managers.

Currently, there is little research on female assistant superintendents as well as middle management in school districts. Few studies exist on female assistant superintendents obtaining and sustaining their positions and there have been no studies conducted on female assistant superintendents as middle space leaders. Because there is a gap in the literature, the researcher desires to explore female assistant superintendents' experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders in middle space leadership. The conceptual framework for this study, which is the concept of middle space leadership, is depicted below as a summary graphic which represents the characteristics of middle space leadership, as drawn from what research literature does

exist. This researcher will endeavor to compare the findings from this qualitative study to the characteristics of middle space leaders, as depicted in this framework (see Figure 2).

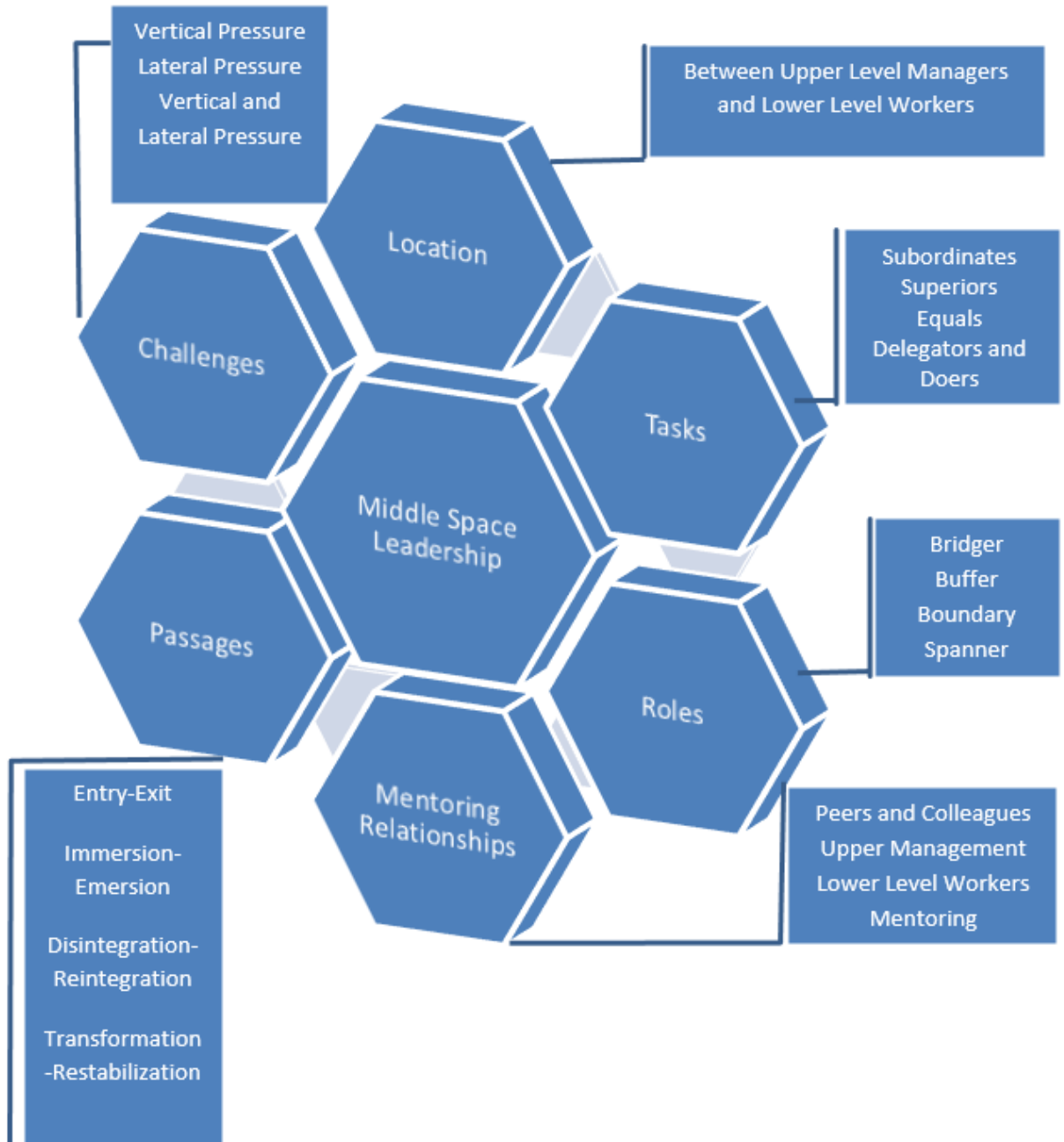


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

### **Chapter III: Methods**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. Thus, the central research question was: How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining and sustaining their position?
2. What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
3. How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?
4. Are there differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and if so, what are the differences?

This chapter includes an overview of the design of the study as well as the role of the researcher. This chapter also includes sampling procedures and a description of participants. Following the sampling procedures is an outline of the data collection, data management, and data analysis procedures. Finally, a discussion of verification procedures is included in this chapter.

## **Research Design**

The research study was designed using qualitative methodology to explore the phenomenon of female assistant superintendents' experiences in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research allows participants to tell their stories. Additionally, qualitative research allows for the understanding of a phenomenon by exploring people's experiences and the meanings of those experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 1997). Qualitative research attempts to "...make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

Qualitative methodology has basic characteristics. Conducting interviews in natural settings allows for face to face interaction where the participant experiences the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative researchers are the research instrument as they determine data that will be collected and then analyze data for meaning, using multiple data sources such as interviews and documents, and analyze data through an inductive process that requires identifying emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). Other characteristics of qualitative methodology are incumbent on the researcher and include 1) that the researcher ensures that the chosen themes capture the participants' intended meaning, 2) recognizes emergent themes as data is collected, 3) is reflexive by disclosing his/her background; 4) acknowledges how this will inform interpretation of data and expectations of what will be gained from the study, and 5) reveals an accurate account of what it was like for participants to experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods allows for thick, rich description of

the phenomenon or experiences being investigated (Merriam, 2009). According to Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009), “the goal for qualitative methods is to provide a richly detailed description....” (p. 181). Description is thick when data provides details of the experiences from participants that help develop themes (Creswell, 2013). When description is rich, it allows the researcher to show several connected details through the use of action verbs and quotes (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative researchers encourage participants to divulge and share their experiences in order that both might understand a phenomenon. According to Merriam (2009), it is through finding the essence of participants’ experiences that researchers can truly begin to make sense of and interpret the meanings of their experiences. Thus, qualitative methodology places emphasis on five diverse approaches. According to Creswell (2013), narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies are approaches used to explore an issue or problem that cannot be measured easily. After considering all qualitative approaches, the researcher chose to conduct a multiple case study to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders.

This multiple case study was conducted to study two cases to investigate the concept of middle space leadership. According to Creswell (2013), conducting a multiple case study allows the researcher to reveal multiple perspectives of those experiencing the phenomenon. Yin (2014) added case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon...in depth and within its real-world context...” (p. 16) and allows for multiple cases to be studied. Similarly when describing case study, Creswell (2013) asserted case study research is conducted to study cases within their context. To clarify,



exploring the essence of the phenomenon (middle space leadership) will enable the researcher to describe the lived experiences of female assistant superintendents that will ultimately be reported in narrative form, comparing two cases: novice female assistant superintendents and experienced or veteran female assistant superintendents.

Multiple case study enables the researcher to describe individuals' experiences that lead to creating themes to summarize the concept or phenomenon the researcher seeks to understand (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Creswell (2013) stated case study describes what all cases have in common when conducting cross-case analysis, as well as noting how they are different. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), the goal of a case study is to present findings in such a way that the reader can relate to being "an active participant in the research and can determine whether or not the study findings could be applied to their own situation" (p. 555). The use of multiple data sources in case study allows the researcher to look through multiple lenses which assist the researcher in fully understanding the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Thus, after reading this multiple case study, readers will have a better understanding of what it is like for female assistant superintendents to experience middle space leadership as they obtain and sustain their positions as middle space leaders.

As mentioned earlier, this multiple case study was conducted to study two cases to explore the phenomenon. Creswell (2013) stated the multiple case study design enables the researcher to select cases that replicate each other. Thus, six female assistant superintendents were studied as two separate cases. Three novice female assistant superintendents comprised one case and three veteran female assistant superintendents comprised the other case. The researcher selected representative cases to include in the

study within their real-world context, and bounding the cases by location helped determine the scope of the research study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) emphasized that bounding the case determines the scope of the data that will be collected. After conducting with-in case analysis, the researcher conducted cross-case analysis to compare the novice female assistant superintendents to the veteran female assistant superintendents. To clarify, each case was studied in the context of the local education school system in one southeastern state.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher is vital to qualitative research. As the key instrument in qualitative research, the researcher's chief function is to identify the essence of the experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Responsible for ensuring the research questions have determined the study's design, the researcher also ensures the research questions are addressed, and conducts interviews as a means to collecting and analyzing data. As the primary instrument for collecting data, the researcher should conduct interviews in a natural setting. Yin (2014) advocated that case study research takes place in the "real-world setting of the case" (p. 113). Creswell (2013) added it is important to conduct the study in a natural setting where the participant feels comfortable and is experiencing the phenomenon. This will encourage the participants to share their experiences and promote collection of rich data to code for themes. Moreover, conducting the interview in a natural setting ensures face to face interaction to enable the researcher to make observations of the participant which will also allow for thick, rich description. The researcher captures thick, rich description through data collected to find emerging themes

and ultimately, and describes the essence of the experiences of the participants experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

When conducting research studies, it is important for the researcher to bracket any ideas, thoughts, feelings, or experiences about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In case studies, it is important for the researcher to journal thoughts and decisions about data when analyzing it to ensure the correct interpretation of data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Thus, the researcher did not share any beliefs nor experiences with the participants as data was collected and analyzed to describe the participants' rich experiences. The researcher also engaged in bracketing to ensure interpretations of data will not be biased (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, it is important for the researcher to be "a good listener" (Creswell, 2013, p. 166; Yin, 2014, p. 73), record information, transcribe accurate information, code for themes, and check interpretations for accuracy all the while bracketing biases.

To verify the accuracy of the data, the researcher checked with participants (member checking) for accurate representation of the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The use of multiple data sources allows the researcher to collect artifacts and documents to contribute to the thick, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, it is important for the researcher to realize the study is emergent (Creswell, 2013) and continuously evolving.

Yin (2014) added researchers study cases for which they have particular interest. Furthermore, it is important for the researcher to conduct a study that illustrates a case that needs to be described and detailed to understand a phenomena (Creswell, 2013). At the time of this study, the researcher was employed as a middle space leader as an

assistant superintendent for a school system located in one southeastern state. Because the researcher is a middle space leader, the researcher was interested in truly understanding the phenomenon of middle space leadership. The researcher bracketed her own assistant superintendent experiences, thus putting those aside to maintain objectivity as much as possible. Despite bracketing, the researcher understood that this strategy is hard to fully achieve because she would not be perceiving everything for the first time and may have been unable to have a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2013). Recognizing this, the researcher employed various strategies to ensure interpretations are accurate. The researcher piloted the interview protocol to ensure interview questions were clear; ensure the study had thick, rich description; effectuated member checks; and used triangulation of data sources to ensure accurate interpretations of what it was like for female assistant superintendents to experience middle space leadership as they obtained and sustained their positions as middle space leaders.

Merriam (1994) summarized the role of the researcher as being responsible for understanding the study, collecting and analyzing multiple data sources, collecting and transcribing data after interviews, reading the data several times, conducting member checks with participants to ensure accurate interpretation and triangulating data using multiple data sources, exploring any unforeseen data, and disclosing any biases while bracketing experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The researcher did all of the above.

### **Sampling Procedures**

This multiple case study consisted of two cases that represent three novice and three veteran female assistant superintendents who were purposefully selected to participate in the study. All six female assistant superintendents were employed at local

school system central offices in one southeastern state. Participants were bounded by site- local school districts in one southeastern state. Both Creswell (2013) and Yin (2014) agreed bounding the case helps determine the scope of the study. The researcher used the purposeful sampling approach to select participants. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research employs purposeful sampling which allows the researcher to select participants who can inform the study by having experienced the phenomenon. It is essential to select participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Purposeful sampling will be used because all participants must meet the criteria of being female and an assistant superintendent to participate in the study.

Two female assistant superintendent groups were sampled. The first group consisted of females who had been assistant superintendents no more than four years and thus were considered novice female assistant superintendents. The second group consisted of females who had been assistant superintendents for five years or more and thus were considered veteran assistant superintendents. This allowed the researcher to explore and compare the experiences of both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents while conducting within-case analysis followed by cross-case analysis to glean for themes. Creswell (2013) recommended not using more than five cases in a study as he believes this provides a reasonable number of cases to identify themes and conduct cross-case analysis. Hence, the sample consisted of six participants across two cases.

Participants were identified using the *2015-2016 State Department of Education Directory*. The directory listed thirty female assistant superintendents in the state chosen. The researcher made a list of all the female assistant superintendents showing female

assistant superintendent names and the local education agencies in which they were employed. The researcher contacted the local education agencies' secretaries to confirm the female assistant superintendents still worked at the local education agencies and to inquire of their years in the position. After speaking with each district, the researcher discovered of the thirty listed female assistant superintendents, four assistant superintendents had retired, two assistant superintendents were now their districts' current superintendents, two assistant superintendents no longer worked in the district, and one assistant superintendent no longer worked as assistant superintendent in the district because her position had changed.

After IRB approval, the researcher contacted each female assistant superintendent using an approved email invitation. The email explained the study's purpose followed by a statement of the researcher's interest in the phenomenon of middle space leadership in relation to female assistant superintendents. Also, an explanation of the criteria to participate in the study was provided. The female assistant superintendents were asked to contact the researcher by phone or email within seven working days if they were interested in participating in the study. A total of eight assistant superintendents responded to the email. Of the eight assistant superintendents who responded, six were current assistant superintendents. Three assistant superintendents were novice female assistant superintendents and three assistant superintendents were veteran female assistant superintendents located in various areas of the state and in urban, suburban, and rural areas. One female assistant superintendent responded she had received a job promotion and no longer worked as assistant superintendent in a local education agency. One female assistant superintendent responded she had retired. A total of six female

assistant superintendents participated in the study. The researcher chose the first responding six female assistant superintendent participants. Of the six participants who responded, the female assistant superintendents represented a wide geographic sample of various sections of the state. Three female assistant superintendents matched the criteria of being employed as a female assistant superintendent no more than four years. Three different female assistant superintendents matched the criteria of being employed as a female assistant superintendent five or more years.

After identifying the sample, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participants to participate in the study. Before obtaining consent, the researcher disclosed the purpose of the study, time needed to conduct the study, and how interview data will be used in the study, insuring anonymity. The researcher gave the participant a copy of the signed consent form. The original copy of the consent form will be kept in a locked, secured fireproof file cabinet in the researcher's home office. Only the researcher will possess the combination code to the locked, secured fireproof file cabinet.

### **Data Collection**

According to Creswell (2013), a multiple case study is conducted to study a case within a real life setting by providing description and details about cases. This description consists of what was experienced and how it was experienced. Data was collected from the participants in the form of field notes, interviews, and artifacts or documents (job description, participants' school websites, and department(s) the assistant superintendent oversees). All interviews were conducted at each assistant superintendent's office at their local education agencies' central office buildings. Collecting multiple sources of data allowed for triangulation of data (Merriam, 2009;

Yin, 2014). The signed consent form was the first item collected. This showed participants had given their consent to participate in the study. Next, a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to begin data collection. According to Creswell (2013), an interview protocol is designed to be used when conducting the interview that usually consists of five to seven open-ended questions. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview allows for probing questions to be asked (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). Utilizing research literature, the researcher created an interview protocol that focused on understanding the phenomenon and addressing the research questions.

Creswell's model for creating the interview protocol was used and thus the researcher's interview protocol included the following:

- Heading which consists of the time, date, place, interviewer, interviewee, and position of interviewee
- Introduction that includes introductory statement regarding purpose of study and brief description of the project, confidentiality statement, and statement regarding the possibility of follow-up interviews
- Instructions listed so that all participants are given the same information
- Probing questions to use to ensure participant provides thick, rich descriptive details of the phenomenon
- Adequate space between each question for scribing notes and writing field notes in the margin; final document may be four to five pages
- A final statement that reflects sincere thanks and gratitude in their participation in the interview. (Creswell, 2013, p. 165)



Next, the researcher conducted a pilot test of the interview protocol with three female assistant superintendents who were not participating in the study to ensure the interview questions were clear enough to elucidate responses from participants that would answer the research questions. According to Creswell (2013), it is a good idea to pilot test interview questions and procedures to “refine and develop research instruments, assess the degrees of observer bias, frame questions, collect background information, and adapt research procedures” (p. 165).

According to Creswell (2013), the interview is the chief method of data collection in qualitative studies. Also, the interview should be conducted in a quiet place to ensure a recording free of any sounds and a place where the participant feels comfortable to share her experiences to allow for the collection of rich data to code for themes (Creswell, 2013). Also, it is important to use good interview procedures. Creswell (2013) outlined these as being a good listener, observing participants when answering questions for any signs of unease or deception, and often repeating and clarifying participant responses to check for understanding. Similarly, Yin (2014) posited asking good questions and being a good listener is vital to conducting case study research. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed immediately afterward. The participants were sent the transcribed interviews for member checking.

### **Data Management**

Data was managed in a secure and locked location at all times. The researcher followed Creswell’s principles for managing data:

- Backup copies of files were maintained
- A reliable recorder was used when conducting interviews

- A list of all data collected was kept
- Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and adhere to confidentiality
- A chart of the data collected was created to allow for easy access to finding collected data. (Creswell, 2013, p. 175)

All collected data was maintained in a fireproof, locked file cabinet at all times. Only the researcher possessed the combination code to access the locked, secured fireproof file cabinet. Data collected that were in the form of computer files or recordings were password protected. The researcher was the only person who could unlock the filing cabinet. While conducting the study, the researcher only disclosed information about the findings to the Dissertation Chair. The researcher destroyed all collected data at the conclusion of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

After data has been collected, it must be analyzed. Both Creswell (2013) and Yin (2014) argued that the researcher simultaneously engages in data collection and data analysis throughout the study. According to Creswell (2013), data analysis is a detailed process that involves organizing data, reading the data, identifying and coding themes, organizing the themes, and then interpreting the data. The researcher adhered to Creswell's framework for analyzing data collected in multiple case studies:

- Organized data by creating and organizing files for data
- Read text and make notes in margins and began to form codes
- Described the data in codes and themes by describing the participants and the describing the setting

- Classified the data in codes and themes by using with-in case analysis followed by cross-case analysis
- Interpreted the data by using “direct interpretation” and creating “naturalistic generalizations of what was learned” (Creswell, 2013, p. 190)
- Visualized the data by presenting pictures or portraits of the cases through narrative and tables. (Creswell, 2013, pp. 190-191)

According to Schwandt (2007), coding is a process that makes data manageable because the researcher is constantly examining the data and categorizing it into segments. Both Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009) agreed that the researcher begins with open coding, a process that involves coding for major themes by making notes on the data. Next, the researcher grouped open codes into axial coding which involved selecting one emerging category and continuously forming categories of information around the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

### **Verification Procedures**

According to Creswell (2013), verification is the first step in achieving validity of the research project. Creswell (2013) further stated “validity is the outcome goal of research and is based on trustworthiness and external reviews” (p. 333). To achieve verification, the researcher conducted a review of literature, implemented multiple case study methods, bracketed any personal thoughts and feelings, maintained field notes, and interviewed an appropriate number of individuals to conduct a multiple case study (Creswell, 2013). The interview protocol was based on concepts found in the research literature. The researcher collected multiple sources of data to achieve triangulation of data (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014), including field notes taken on site where interviews

were conducted (school district central offices), job descriptions of participants, and website information that shed light on the participants' work setting. The researcher also conducted member checks to check for accurate interpretation of data and conducted audit trails.

### **Summary**

Utilizing qualitative research design, the researcher conducted this multiple case study to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. Participants were purposefully selected in one southeastern state from local education agencies to participate in the study. Six interviews were conducted in the participants' local work setting (school district central offices), and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Other data, such as field notes, job descriptions, artifacts supplied by the participant, and websites were analyzed, as well. Lastly, the researcher utilized verification procedures to ensure the study's validity and accurate interpretations of the findings.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

This chapter discusses the findings from data collection and analysis of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents' experiences in middle space leadership. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. Thus the central research question was: How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining and sustaining their position?
2. What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
3. How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?
4. Are there differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and if so, what are the differences?

This multiple case study was used to study two cases (i.e. both the novice and the veteran assistant superintendents) in middle space leadership roles. According to Creswell (2013), conducting a multiple case study allows the researcher to reveal multiple perspectives of those experiencing the phenomenon. Yin (2014) added case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon...in depth and within its real-world

context...” (p. 16) and allows for multiple cases to be studied. Similarly, when describing case study, Creswell (2013) asserted case study research is conducted to study cases within their context. To clarify, exploring the essence of the phenomenon (middle space leadership) will enable the researcher to describe the lived experiences of female assistant superintendents that will ultimately be reported in narrative form, comparing two cases: novice female assistant superintendents and experienced or veteran female assistant superintendents.

This multiple case study was conducted to study two cases to explore the phenomenon. The researcher selected representative cases to include in the study within their real world context, and bound the cases by location helped determine the scope of the research study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) emphasized that bounding the case determines the scope of the data that will be collected. After conducting with-in case analysis, the researcher conducted cross-case analysis to compare the novice female assistant superintendents to the veteran female assistant superintendents. To clarify, each case was studied in the context of the local education school system in one southeastern state.

Participants were identified using the *2015-2016 State Department of Education Directory*. The directory listed thirty female assistant superintendents in the state chosen. The researcher made a list of all the female assistant superintendents showing female assistant superintendent names and the local education agencies in which they were employed. The researcher contacted the local education agencies’ secretaries to confirm the female assistant superintendents still worked at the local education agencies and to inquire of their years in the position

After IRB approval, the researcher contacted each female assistant superintendent using an approved email invitation. The email explained the study's purpose followed by a statement of the researcher's interest in the phenomenon of middle space leadership in relation to female assistant superintendents. Also, an explanation of the criteria to participate in the study was provided. The female assistant superintendents were asked to contact the researcher by phone or email within seven working days if they were interested in participating in the study. A total of eight female assistant superintendents responded to the email. Of the eight assistant superintendents who responded, six were current assistant superintendents. Three assistant superintendents were novice female assistant superintendents and three were veteran female assistant superintendents located in various areas of the state and in urban, suburban, and rural area. One female assistant superintendent responded she had received a job promotion and no longer worked as assistant superintendent in a local education agency. One female assistant superintendent responded she had retired. A total of six female assistant superintendents participated in the study. Of the six participants, the female assistant superintendents represented a wide geographic sample of various sections of the state and were located in rural, suburban, and urban cities across the state.

Three female assistant superintendents matched the criteria of being employed as a female assistant superintendent no more than four years and hence were referred to as novice female assistant superintendents. Three different female assistant superintendents matched the criteria of being employed as a female assistant superintendent five or more years and hence were referred to as veteran female assistant superintendents.

The researcher conducted interviews and examined artifacts (field notes, job descriptions, and website information) to collect data to conduct this study

### **Veteran Female Assistant Superintendent Participant Descriptions**

**Pearl.** Pearl (pseudonym) was a veteran female assistant superintendent who worked at Phonics School District (pseudonym). Pearl has been an assistant superintendent for seven years all of which have been while employed at Phonics School District. Pearl started her education career in Phonics School District as a teacher and has progressed to assistant superintendent all while employed at Phonics School District. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, Pearl was a classroom teacher in Phonics School District for twelve years and a high school assistant principal for two years. After being assistant principal for two years, Pearl was a junior high principal for four and half years followed by serving as a principal for a school that housed grades kindergarten through the twelfth grade for four and half years. Afterward, Pearl became a high school principal for four years followed by her position as a Central Office School Group Supervisor for three years. After being Central Office School Group Supervisor, she was a high school principal for eleven years. After being a high school principal for eleven years, she became assistant superintendent, a position that she has held for seven years. She has been employed at Phonics School District for 47 years. Her highest degree earned is a Doctor of Philosophy Degree. She also has earned her Bachelor's, Master's, and Education Specialist Degrees from colleges in one southeastern state.

Phonics School District was an urban school district located in the central part of the state. The population of this area is estimated at 660,000 according to the 2015 Census Bureau Statistics. The school district has a population of over 36,000 students



and 2,000 teachers. The population makeup of the district is as follows: 54% Caucasian, 43% African-American, 4% Hispanic, and 3% Other. With 57 schools and serving grades Pre-K through twelfth grade, the district has 57 principals and 64 assistant principals. The schools are between five and 40 miles from central office as some schools are not in close proximity to the district's central office. Fifty-seven percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Pearl's office is located at the district's Central Office. The district's central office is a two-story brick building with tile floors and an elevator. The large, spacious central office houses about one hundred other offices including nutrition, human resources, and finance. As I arrived at the Central Office, Pearl was dressed in a two-piece business suit and wore flat shoes. Her carpeted office was spacious and located down the hall from the front entrance. Her office was located in close proximity to the superintendent's office. As I arrived, her office door was opened and degrees hung from her crème-colored neutral walls. A computer, phone, and papers covered her desk. She sat behind her brown wooden desk facing me.

Pearl is responsible for a number of job duties. Her assistant superintendent duties consist of overseeing local school principals, information technology, and student services. The job progression chart shows that she is right under the superintendent and is next to the superintendent in charge.

**Shirley.** Shirley (pseudonym) was a veteran female assistant superintendent who worked at Student Success School District (pseudonym). Shirley has been an assistant superintendent for 11 years all of which have been while employed at Student Success School District. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, Shirley was employed in

Student Success School District as a teacher for four years, an instructional resource specialist for one year, and an elementary school principal for eight years. She has been employed in Student Success School District for 24 years. Her highest degree earned is a Doctorate of Philosophy Degree. She also has earned her Bachelor's, Master's, and Education Specialist Degrees from colleges in one southeastern state.

Student Success School District was a suburban school district located in the southern part of the state. The population of this area is estimated at 33,000 according to the 2015 Census Bureau Statistics. The school district has a population of over 2,100 students and has 180 professional staff members. The population makeup of the district is as follows: 43% Caucasian, 49% African-American, 5% Hispanic, and 3% Multi/Other. With 6 schools and serving grades kindergarten through twelfth grade, the district has 6 principals and 4 assistant principals. The schools are not in close proximity to the district's central office. Seventy-three percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Shirley's office is located at the district's Central Office. The district's central office also houses fourteen offices including nutrition, maintenance, and transportation. As I arrived to the Central Office, Shirley was dressed in a two-piece skirt business suit and wore pumps. Her carpeted office was spacious and located down the hall from the superintendent's office. A computer, phone, and papers were placed on her desk. Pictures of faith-based, motivational quotes hung from her off-white, crème-colored walls. Filing cabinets and a book shelf lined the neutral-colored walls. Instead of sitting behind her desk, she sat beside me in the other brown chair reserved for visitors as she participated in the interview.

Shirley is responsible for a number of job duties. Her assistant superintendent duties consist of federal programs and curriculum. The job progression chart shows that she is right under the superintendent and is the next to the superintendent in charge.

**Kerrie.** Kerrie (pseudonym) was a veteran female assistant superintendent who worked at Knowledge School District (pseudonym). Shirley has been an assistant superintendent for 8 years all of which have been while employed at Knowledge School District. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, Kerrie was employed at Knowledge School District as a teacher for 17 years, an elementary school principal for less than a year, and central office coordinator for two years. She has been employed in Student Success School District for 27 years. Her highest degree earned is an Educational Specialist Degree. She also has earned her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees from colleges in one southeastern state.

Knowledge School District was a rural school district located in the southern part of the state. The population of this area is estimated at 6,600 according to the 2015 Census Bureau Statistics. The school district has a population of over 1,200 students and has 160 staff members. The population makeup of the district is as follows: 73% Caucasian, 24% African-American, 7% Hispanic, and 9% Other. With 3 schools and serving grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, the district has 3 principals and 3 assistant principals. All schools are in close proximity to the district's central office. Fifty-seven percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Kerrie's office is located at the district's Central Office. The district's wooden central office building also houses other offices including the superintendent's office and finance. As I arrived to the Central Office, Kerrie was dressed in a two-piece business suit and heels. Her office with

wooden floors and off-white walls was spacious and located down the hall from the superintendent's office. Her office was decorated with pictures, golf balls, plaques, and motivational quotes covered her walls. Her nameplate gleamed from the sunlight. Covered with a computer, phone, and files, she sat at her desk facing me.

Kerrie is responsible for a number of job duties. Her assistant superintendent duties consist of overseeing federal programs, technology, curriculum, and supervision over principals. Kerrie stated that she is right under the superintendent and is the next to the superintendent in charge.

### **Novice Female Assistant Superintendent Participant Descriptions**

**Tessie.** Tessie (pseudonym) was a novice female assistant superintendent who worked at Taxonomy School District (pseudonym). Tessie has been an assistant superintendent for eight months all of which have been while employed at Taxonomy School District. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, Tessie was employed in Taxonomy School District as a teacher for twelve years, teacher and assistant principal for one year, high school assistant principal for five years, and middle school principal for four years. She has been employed in Taxonomy School District for 24 years. Her highest degree earned is a Doctorate in Education Degree. She also has earned her Bachelor's, Master's, and Education Specialist Degrees from colleges in one southeastern state.

Taxonomy School District was a suburban school district located in the northern part of the state. The population of this area is estimated at 13,000 according to the 2015 Census Bureau Statistics. The school district has a population of over 2,800 students and has 300 staff members. The population makeup of the district is as follows: 75%

Caucasian, 15% African-American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% Other. With 7 schools and serving grades kindergarten through twelfth grade, the district has 7 principals and 4 assistant principals. The schools are in close proximity to the district's central office. Thirty-one percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Tessie's office is located at the district's Central Office which is a large, three-story brick building built in the 1920s. The district's central office also houses other offices including the superintendent's office and finance office. As I arrived to the Central Office, Tessie was dressed in a black and white blazer with black dress pants business suit, pearls, and heels. Large and spacious, her wooden-floored office was located down the hall from the superintendent's office. A computer, phone, and papers were placed on her desk. A large wooden conference table with wooden chairs and large area rug were visible when entering her office. Photos of her children and her degrees were hung on the off-white, crème-colored walls. Filing cabinets and a book shelf lined the neutral-colored walls. She sat behind her wooden desk covered with a computer, phone, lamp, and files during the interview. The large window across the back wall provided outstanding lighting.

Tessie is responsible for a number of job duties. Her assistant superintendent duties consist of curriculum and instruction and assessment. Her job description shows that she reports to the superintendent, and she stated she is next to the superintendent in charge.

**Vanessa.** Vanessa (pseudonym) was a novice female assistant superintendent who worked at Visual Learning School District (pseudonym). Vanessa has been an assistant superintendent for three years all of which have been while employed at Visual

Learning School District. Vanessa started her education career in Visual Learning School District as a teacher's aide and has progressed to assistant superintendent all while employed at Visual Learning School District. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, Vanessa was a teacher's aide in Visual Learning School District for three years and elementary and middle school teacher for twelve years. After being an elementary and middle school teacher for twelve years, Vanessa was a math coach for three years followed by middle school assistant principal for one year. Afterward, Vanessa became a principal for four to five years followed by Personnel Specialist in the Office of Human Resources for one year. After being Personnel Specialist, she was Director of Human Resources for three years. After being Director of Human Resources for three years, she became assistant superintendent, a position that she has held for three years. She has been employed at Visual Learning School District for 28 years. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees from colleges in one southeastern state. Her highest degree earned is a Master's Degree.

Visual Learning School District was an urban school district located in the central part of the state. The population of this area is estimated at 226,000 according to the 2015 Census Bureau Statistics. The school district has a population of over 30,000 students and 3,900 staff members. The population makeup of the district is as follows: 13% Caucasian, 78% African-American, 4% Hispanic, and 5% Other. With 54 schools and serving grades Pre-K through twelfth grade, the district has 54 principals and 48 assistant principals. All schools are not located in close proximity to the district's central office. Seventy-three percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Vanessa's office is located in the main central office building. Visual Learning School District has a combined total of ten Central Office buildings. The district's main central office building is a four-story brick building with tile floors and an elevator. The large, spacious central office also houses the superintendent's office, the other assistant superintendent's office, and board room. As I arrived to the Central Office, Vanessa was dressed in a dress with heels. Her carpeted office was spacious and located on the second floor. Her office was located in close proximity to the superintendent's office. As I arrived, her office door was opened and her degrees hung from her crème-colored neutral walls. A computer, phone, and papers covered her desk. She sat behind her brown wooden desk facing me. Her office smelled strongly of fresh linen and an area rug covered on the floor. Her walls were covered by two white boards, one of which displayed her things-to-do list, a bookshelf, filing cabinets, and family photos. Two windows allowed sunlight to illuminate her office.

Vanessa is responsible for a number of job duties. Her assistant superintendent duties consist of overseeing human resources and personnel. The job progression chart shows that she is right under the superintendent and is next to the superintendent in charge.

**Jasmine.** Jasmine (pseudonym) was a novice female assistant superintendent who worked at Joint Committee School District (pseudonym). Jasmine has been an assistant superintendent for three years all of which have been while employed at Joint Committee School District. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, Jasmine was a middle school math teacher in Joint Committee School District for one year. Afterward, she left Joint Committee School District and worked as a math teacher in another system

for three years. After leaving Joint Committee School District for three years, Jasmine was hired back at Joint Committee School District for one year as a high school math teacher. Afterward, Jasmine was middle school counselor and psychometrist for nine years at Joint Committee School District before becoming assistant superintendent.

Jasmine's highest degree earned is an Educational Specialist Degree. She also has earned Bachelor's and Master's Degrees from colleges in one southeastern state.

Joint Committee School District was a rural school district located in the southern part of the state. The population of this area is estimated at 4,400 according to the 2015 Census Bureau Statistics. The school district has a population of over 1250 students. The population makeup of the district is as follows: 50% Caucasian, 13% African-American, 26% Hispanic, and 2% Other. The district has 3 schools and serves grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. Fifty-nine percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Jasmine's office is located at the district's Central Office. The district's central office also houses three other offices including nutrition, maintenance, and transportation. As I arrived to the Central Office, Jasmine was dressed in a black shirt and pants and wore flat shoes. With wooden floors, her office was small and located down the hall near the superintendent's office. A bookshelf and family photos hung on the walls. A computer, phone, and papers were on her desk. She sat at her wooden desk facing me.

Jasmine is responsible for a number of job duties. Her assistant superintendent duties consist of overseeing special education and federal programs. She stated there were two assistant superintendents of which the other one (male) would be the next in



line and she would be third t under the superintendent and the other assistant superintendent due to seniority.

Table 1

*Matrix of Veteran Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Geographical Location</b>	<b>Population Descriptor</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years as Assistant Superintendent</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Years Worked in District</b>	<b>Pathway to Assistant Superintendency</b>	<b>Area or Areas Overseen</b>
<b>Pearl</b>	Northern	Urban	Caucasian	7 years	Doctoral Degree	47 years	Teacher Assistant Principal Principal Central Office Supervisor Assistant Superintendent	Principals Information Technology Student Services
<b>Shirley</b>	Southern	Suburban	African-American	11 years	Doctoral Degree	24 years	Teacher Instructional Resource Specialist Principal Assistant Superintendent	Federal Programs Curriculum
<b>Kerrie</b>	Southern	Rural	Caucasian	8 years	Educational Specialist	27 years	Teacher Principal Coordinator Assistant Superintendent	Federal Programs Technology Curriculum Principals

Table 2

*Matrix of Novice Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Geographical Location</b>	<b>Population Descriptor</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years as Assistant Superintendent</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Years Worked in District</b>	<b>Pathway to Assistant Superintendency</b>	<b>Area or Areas Overseen</b>
<b>Tessie</b>	Northern Suburban		Caucasian	8 months	Doctoral Degree	24 years	Teacher Teacher/ Assistant Principal Assistant Principal Principal Assistant Superintendent	Curriculum and Instruction  Assessment
<b>Vanessa</b>	Central	Urban	African-American	3 years	Master's Degree	28 years	Teacher's Aide Teacher Math Coach Assistant Principal Principal Personnel Specialist Director Assistant Superintendent	Human Resources
<b>Jasmine</b>	Southern	Rural	Caucasian	3 Years	Educational Specialist	12 years	Teacher Counselor/ Psychometrist Assistant Superintendent	Special Education  Federal Programs

**Data Analysis Methods**

This multiple case study was conducted to study two cases to investigate the concept of middle space leadership by answering the central research question which was: How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders? In order to

answer the central research question, the following sub-questions were asked of the participants:

1. What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining and sustaining position?
2. What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
3. How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?
4. Are there differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and if so, what are the differences?

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed immediately afterward. The participants were sent the transcribed interviews for member checking. After data had been collected, it was analyzed. The researcher adhered to Creswell's framework for analyzing data collected in multiple case studies:

- Organized data by creating and organizing files for data
- Read text and make notes in margins and began to form codes
- Described the data in codes and themes by describing the participants and the describing the setting
- Classified the data in codes and themes by using with-in case analysis followed by cross-case analysis
- Interpreted the data by using "direct interpretation" and creating "naturalistic generalizations of what was learned" (Creswell, 2013, p. 190)

- Visualized the data by presenting pictures or portraits of the cases through narrative and tables. (Creswell, 2013, pp. 190-191)

### **Analysis of Challenges of Female Assistant Superintendents**

The first part of the first research question pertained to the challenges encountered by female assistant superintendents in obtaining their positions. Research sub-question 1a was the following: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining their position? The findings are presented for the two cases in the following order: novice female assistant superintendents and veteran female assistant superintendents.

#### **Novice female assistant superintendents' challenges obtaining their position.**

One theme emerged from the novice female assistant superintendents' responses to the interview questions regarding challenges they described in obtaining their position which is displayed in Table 3. The results revealed that two novice female assistant superintendents believed they did not experience any challenges obtaining their position. The theme has a quote supplied from participants that provides thick, rich description to support the theme.

***No challenges.*** The novice female assistant superintendents believed that they did not experience any challenges obtaining their position as assistant superintendent. Both Tessie and Jasmine articulated they had not encountered any challenges obtaining their position. When the researcher asked Tessie if she faced any challenges when obtaining this position, she stated:

Honestly, no I mean, I'm looking at the things that you have here. I have an incredibly supportive family. My children are grown. That certainly makes this

easier. I'll say that having kids that are somewhat independent. They both still live with me, you know, because they're both in college, but they're still not dependent on me for just getting by daily. They can do that on their own. I've never felt any gender bias in my career. I realize there are probably a lot of women that do experience that, but I personally have never felt like, oh, I'm not getting that. There's been jobs that I've applied for that I haven't gotten, but I've never felt like it was because of my gender. I've always been able to go, "Well, he has more experience than me," or, "Her qualifications are better than mine or richer than mine," so I've never felt like that, certainly not with experience.

When the researcher asked Jasmine if she faced any challenges when obtaining this position, she stated: "No, I don't think so."

#### **Veteran female assistant superintendents' challenges obtaining their position.**

One theme emerged from the veteran female assistant superintendents' responses to the interview questions regarding challenges they described in obtaining their position which is displayed in Table 4. The results revealed that all veteran female assistant superintendents believed they did not experience any challenges obtaining their position. The theme has a quote supplied from participants that provides thick, rich description to support the theme.

*No challenges.* The veteran female assistant superintendents believed that they did not experience any challenges obtaining their position as assistant superintendent. They shared they felt they had not experienced any challenges. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie articulated they had not encountered any challenges obtaining their position. When the

researcher asked Pearl if she faced any challenges when obtaining this position, she stated:

In this particular position, gender has not been an issue, nor has family. Those challenges were held before I got to this position. The gender challenges were probably prior to that. The challenges of being treated differently and all happened more at the school level, and I think some of those have been overcome, and are not quite as prevalent as they were years ago.

When the researcher asked Shirley if she faced any challenges when obtaining this position, she stated:

I really cannot say that the challenges I faced were directly related to this position. I came to this position in 2006. A couple of years later, I decided to pursue the Ph.D. and that created a challenge, but that challenge wasn't a function of my position it was a function of the challenges pursuing another degree or a degree with a family and full time job, again parents, all of that fun stuff. It's just one of those life situations that presents challenges, but my challenges really were not a function of the position by itself. I can't think of any major challenge that I had just because I was in this position.

When the researcher asked Kerrie if she faced any challenges when obtaining this position, she stated, "There were no challenges I faced for this position."

Table 3

*Novice Female Assistant Superintendents' Challenges Obtaining Their Position*

Theme	Tessie	Vanessa	Jasmine
No challenges	"Honestly, no. I have an incredibly supportive family...I've never felt any gender bias in my career."		"No, I don't think so."

Table 4

*Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents' Challenges Obtaining Their Position*

Theme	Pearl	Shirley	Kerrie
No challenges	"In this particular position, gender has not been an issue, nor has family. Those challenges were held before I got to this position.... The gender challenges were probably prior to that. The challenges of being treated differently and all happened more at the school level, and I think some of those have been overcome, and are not quite as prevalent as they were years ago."	"I really cannot say that the challenges I faced were directly related to this position.... I can't think of any major challenge that I had just because I was in this position."	"There were no challenges I faced for this position."

The second part of the first research question pertained to the challenges encountered by female assistant superintendents in sustaining their positions. Research sub-question 1b was the following: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in sustaining their position? The findings are presented for the two cases in the following order: novice female assistant superintendents and veteran female assistant superintendents.

**Novice female assistant superintendents' challenges sustaining their position.**

Five themes emerged from the novice female assistant superintendents' responses to the

interview questions regarding challenges they described in sustaining their position which are displayed in Table 5. The results revealed that all novice female assistant superintendents believed they experienced challenges sustaining their position. These challenges were: their opinions were respected but not acted upon and they were limited in final decision making, having a demanding job, and changing relationships. Two novice female assistant superintendents divulged that a challenge sustaining their position was missing student interaction. The themes are depicted in Table 5 and have a quote supplied from participants that provides thick, rich description to support the themes.

***Opinions respected but not acted upon.*** The novice female assistant superintendents believed a challenge sustaining their position as assistant superintendent was that their opinions were respected but not acted upon. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine articulated they had encountered this challenge in sustaining their position. When the researcher asked Tessie about her feelings when suggestions, recommendations, or even decisions were overturned, she stated:

If he says, 'No, we're going to go a different route,' I say, 'Okay, that works for me.' I mean, it doesn't have to be my way. I'm not an it's-got-to-be-my-way kind of girl. I think if I had that personality, it would be harder, but I don't, so that helps a lot.

When the researcher asked Vanessa about her feelings when suggestions, recommendations, or even decisions are overturned, she stated:

In all honesty, I'm so reflective in nature. I was not offended by it, but what I did do is I tried to see it from her point of view. I have real tough skin. Like I said I



have a big smile, but I have very tough skin, so things like that don't agitate me. I don't take it personally because at the end of the day, I realize who she is and who I am. I understand her role, and I understand my role. Then she's going to hold responsible for everything. She has to be comfortable with the decisions that are made. Some recommendations, especially for terminations, sometimes we don't agree. I'll say, 'I think you need to terminate.' She'll say, 'I think they deserve another chance.' We really sit down and have that, and then at night, we vouch for each other.

When the researcher asked Jasmine about her feelings when suggestions, recommendations, or even decisions are overturned, she stated: "I haven't had it to where she has said no. For example, without making me see a bigger picture."

***Limited in final decision making.*** The novice female assistant superintendents believed a challenge sustaining their position as assistant superintendent was they were limited in final decision making. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine articulated they had encountered this challenge in sustaining their position. When the researcher asked Tessie about her experiences with making final decisions, she stated:

Sometimes it's challenging only because in a middle space position like this, you're hesitant sometimes to make a decision unless you really understand where your superintendent is on that issue, if that makes sense.

Tessie felt comfortable making final decisions regarding her areas of responsibility which consisted of curriculum and instruction. Tessie replied that she felt comfortable making

decisions regarding curriculum and instruction stating, “I feel very respected in terms of my decision making in my lane, if that makes sense. I've got my lane.”

When the researcher asked Vanessa about her experiences with making decisions, she stated: “Final decisions are hers whatever the thing is, whatever it is.” Vanessa could only make sole decisions regarding her areas of responsibility which consisted of hiring personnel that the principals recommended to her. Explaining her limited decision making, Vanessa disclosed:

As far as hiring is concerned the ones at the central office level, of course, usually she's on the panel that I put together along with me, but the other ones, the lower level positions those are pretty much mine to make. Principals make recommendations to me, and I pretty much yea or nay it, and then those they go to the board for final approval, of course, but those are usually mine. The way this department is handled and run the innovations those are mine to make. I just have to make sure I have the funding, and she has to approve that part of it. Those kinds of things are strictly just mine.

When the researcher asked Jasmine about her experiences with making final decisions, she stated: “Those big decisions, I would never make without consulting.” Like Tessie and Vanessa, Jasmine could only make sole decisions regarding her areas of responsibility which consisted of decisions regarding special education and federal programs. Jasmine explained: “Budget purchasing, of course our budgets have to be done ahead of time through IDEA and Title, so there's guidelines. Obviously, I cannot go and spend the money, but if we need something that can be done. All of the special

education decisions fall on me whether it's paraprofessionals. Whatever it is. Those big decisions, I would never make without consulting.”

***Demanding job.*** All three novice female assistant superintendents referenced the job as being demanding or overwhelming. Tessie stated:

I think the biggest challenge I have in my position is the breadth of the things that I'm responsible for. Just testing alone can take over your life. I've been in 10 webinars in the last two weeks, just the breadth. That, I've had to really tackle that with a lot of organization. I'm not afraid to ask questions. I mean, I'll ask the questions. I'm not afraid to say, 'I have no clue, but I'll get back to you.' I guess my biggest challenge is not even the depth of what I do. The depth is not what's challenging. It's the breadth of it. It's just the wide range of different things that I'm responsible for.

Vanessa articulated:

It is demanding because you're really on call 24/7. We work Monday through Friday, but like I said, every principal in this district, not only do they have my work cell phone. I was crazy enough to give them my personal cell phone. They do call. I had to finally put a disclaimer out there at one of the workshops to say on Sunday, from this time to this time, I'm at church. Can I just have that time? So it is demanding, but by the same token I'm a leader who when I decided to accept this role, I knew what my vision was for this role. I remember being a principal. When I had situations in my building, I would carry that all night, and then I'll wake up, and I got to go be a leader in a building. I had no one to talk to. That's

hard, and you had to deal with children, so I try to take that burden off of them. Like I said, I'm constantly given additional duties. Sometimes, they're not human resource situations, but I open myself up to that, just the constant being on call. I don't have small children. My children are grown and gone. I live by myself, so I can do those things, but is that demanding? Of course. Education is demanding, especially, in a system where there are so many improvements that need to be made, and because I've grown up in this system professionally. I'm not a native of Visual Arts County, but I've grown here professionally. My heart is in this, so is it demanding? Of course, it is because I want to see the system succeed not just because I'm here. When I'm gone, I want it to succeed, so completely demanding. Everybody wants something now, and they're all dependent on me to give it to them, and that it has to be perfect. I have perfect calls, and there are no perfect calls, sometimes, so demanding most definitely.

When the researcher asked whether the position of assistant superintendent is demanding, Jasmine responded, “Yes. I do think it is. There's constantly decisions, plans, paperwork, deadlines, meetings, things that have to met, things that have to be completed in a timely manner.”

***Change in relationships.*** All three novice female assistant superintendents stated that their relationships had changed. They all realized that this was an important change. In regards to experiencing a change in relationships, Tessie articulated:

I still have great relationships with those people, but I have had to. Here's why. Let me explain, give you little background. My assistant principal became the principal of the school, so I had to kind of purposefully pull back from that. Not

from my relationships with those people, but from my constant contact with that building.

In regards to experiencing a change in relationships, Vanessa stated:

Changing some of those relationships, people who I served with as principals with, we couldn't have that same communication. Those gripes and complaining sessions that you have on the phone, I couldn't do that anymore because my role then became I might be the person that has to recommend your termination. You have to add a little separation in there. The one thing that made it easy, my friends are usually, they've always been outside of the district. I don't really socialize with Visual Learning School District employees. I don't have a Facebook page for that reason. I've just always limited myself. I separate my personal from my professional. I always have, and that made this transition easier because I didn't owe anyone anything. I didn't have those deep-seated relationships. I don't have any relatives in the system. I don't have any children in the system anymore. Just that separation, it's really always been there. Not a lot of people really know me like that, and that does make it easier for me.

In regards to experiencing a change in relationships, Jasmine divulged:

The roles had changed. Instead of the peer to peer, colleague to colleague, it's leadership versus, I shouldn't say versus, but the roles are different. That reception is different. You work at central office. You don't work at the school now. Those interpersonal relationships change somewhat.

***Missing student interaction.*** Tessie and Jasmine cited they missed student interaction. Tessie stated, “It was the hardest thing to me when I left the classroom and went to a leadership position, because I initially felt like my impact on students was diminishing.” Jasmine stated, “That's the sad thing about this position. I don't have nearly the interaction that I used to. That was probably one of the harder things that very first year.”

***Veteran female assistant superintendents’ challenges sustaining their position.*** Four themes emerged from the veteran female assistant superintendents’ responses to the interview questions regarding challenges they described in sustaining their position which is displayed in Table 6. The results revealed that all veteran female assistant superintendents believed they experienced challenges sustaining their position. The theme has a quote supplied from participants that provides thick, rich description to support the theme.

***Opinions respected but not acted upon.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie felt their opinions were respected but not always acted upon. When asked how she feels when her superintendent overturns a decision, Pearl stated, “It depends on the situation, because he does listen to each one of them differently. Sometimes he'll say, ‘No, I'm not going to do this,’ and we'll say, ‘Okay.’” Shirley stated, “It made me feel that, and it was a discipline decision, but it made me feel that I should've been more, it was a learning experience.”

Kerrie stated:

Yes, there has been some that have not been accepted, and you have to understand the process and understand the chain of command. You have to understand that being that middle space person, you know your role. You may not like it, but

then in the end, he is my superior, and I will support what he has recommended. I think that's all you can do is be professional and loyal to the person that you are the assistant to.

***Limited in final decision-making.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie expressed they were limited in final decision making. Pearl stated:

You have a lot of people wanting information from you. A lot of people try to gain knowledge from you, and you have to be very careful that you filter what you say and tell others. Decision making, recommendations, of course the superintendent makes the decisions.

Pearl could only make sole decisions regarding her areas of responsibility which consisted of evaluating principals, instructional technology, and student services. When asked which decisions are hers alone to make, Pearl replied:

Generally speaking, I evaluate the principals alone. I do the daily supervision of the principals and make recommendations to them. I work with the staff of the two departments. I supervise and make those operational decisions alone.

In regards to being limited in final decision-making, Shirley stated:

I don't really encounter a lot of challenges in working in this middle space between him administrators. Pretty much when I speak, I can speak pretty much definitively and when in doubt, I'll ask him.

When asked about any decisions that are the superintendent's alone to make, Shirley replied, "I'm sure financial decisions." Shirley stated that some decisions are hers alone

to make. She stated that she could make sole decisions regarding instruction and curriculum. Shirley remarked:

I'm able to make a lot of decisions on my own regarding instruction and curriculum. I say on my own but that comes from my years of collaborating with the superintendent and knowing and understanding his expectations. Then I'm able to make my own decisions. I'm able to make a lot of financial decisions within my budget within my programs, my Title I, Title II, Title VI, those kinds of things.

Shirley stated that she needed to consult with the superintendent for specific decisions and for those decisions which carried uncertainty. She would ask him. She stated:

On the financial side, obviously when it comes to large purchases, I do need to consult with him. Anything that's going to be a sweeping curriculum or instructional adjustment would need his approval. Pretty much when I speak, I can speak pretty much definitively, and when in doubt I'll ask him.

Kerrie also acknowledged being limited in final decision making asserting, "Well, the final decision is his [superintendent's] and if it's something that's going to have to be something that I don't feel like I have the authority to make that decision, I'm going to take it to him." Stating that she could make sole decisions regarding the programs she oversees, Kerrie explained, "It's going to have to do with the programs I am responsible for, if it's an expenditure and federal programs and they want to hire someone part time that is my decision."



***Demanding job.*** All three veteran female assistant superintendents felt a challenge was that their job was demanding. Pearl stated:

Yeah, it's demanding of your time in the fact that you are expected to be at lots of things in lots of times of the day. Things that you have on your desk may not get done today. You may be here until five o'clock, and some days you've got a football game to go to or a band concert or multiple things, a board meeting to go to at night, so you have many time frames that may not be your own. You planned to be in your office working, and somebody is going to drop by and say, 'Can we talk about this?' You stop what you're doing, and you work with them. Closing doors is not a good idea. You learn very quickly that people need to feel comfortable walking in and saying, 'You got time to talk?' You cannot just say, 'Look I am busy.' That's why you don't see the doors closed here very often. The people like to be able to come in and say, 'Can you talk a few minutes or I've really got an issue, can we talk it through?' You have to be willing to do that. Is that demanding? Yes, because the things you'd planned to do may not get done or may get done a different way.

Shirley also felt a challenge was that her job was demanding. She stated:

I guess I was a little surprised by the sheer volume of work. Having to manage projects, monies, whatever for every school. That can take a lot of doing and because I'm a planner, and I like to be organized. I guess I had little bit of frustration because you can't just start one project and finish it. You're probably working on fifteen things at the same time. That was a real paradigm shift for me

that all of these projects and initiatives were all ongoing and you just had to go with the flow with that. I've learned to adjust to it but that was probably the biggest surprise for me. Any time you're making decisions for children and for their future, no matter how you look at that, that's demanding. It's to be taken seriously. Yeah, I think it can be demanding. There's so many moving pieces to make those best decisions happen for kids that does get demanding.

Kerrie stated:

The stress of changing gears when you're doing so many programs. I started off at 7:30 this morning. I switched gears six times before you got here. Not in one particular program, but in six different issues that I was dealing with, never a dull moment. I do think it's very demanding now that's from my personal standpoint, but I'm challenged every day. I'm busy every day. I'm problem solving every day. I am helping people every day. I am in constant planning mode. I am just trying to make things better and be proactive in things knowing if I can make a decision that can trickle down to everybody and make things better, then I need to be making those decisions.

***Change in relationships.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all experienced a change in relationships while sustaining their positions. Pearl stated that it is a lonely position. She articulated:

Probably the fact that it's a lonely position. In the schools and in other positions, there's always someone you can share with, someone you can talk about issues

with. In this position, you either talk to the superintendent or the other deputy.

You can't share a lot of things with others.

Shirley felt that as assistant superintendent, you must set boundaries and not cross those boundaries. She stated:

I work with a lot of people that are like my age, and I've known them because I'm from this area. I consider them friends. You have to establish professional lines that can't be crossed either by me or by them because of your role as an assistant superintendent. You don't want folks too chummy around work. You can be chummy about everything else. I guess the big thing is making sure everybody understands what those lines are.

Similarly, Kerrie expressed that she experienced a change in relationships where things are different and the relationships now have different expectations. Kerrie explained:

In a small district, you're friends with a lot of people so you really have to define that line of supervision. Knowing your parameters, know their parameters. You know keeping it business with a cordial relationship and then when you transition, when you cross the line from teacher to administrator, you enter a whole different world. Your life changes; your relationships change. You're almost in an isolated group; you're no longer when you sit at a table for a meeting. It's different; you have a different role. People look at you different; they wait on you for different answers than just the regular meeting of a teacher's meeting. They look for leadership; they look for you to solve the problem, to help them solve the problem.

Table 5

*Novice Female Assistant Superintendents' Challenges Sustaining Their Position*

Theme	Tessie	Vanessa	Jasmine
Opinions Respected but Not Acted Upon	“If he [superintendent] says, ‘No, we're going to go a different route,’ I say, ‘Okay, that works for me.’ I mean, it doesn't have to be my way.”	“In all honesty, I'm so reflective in nature I was not offended by it, but what I did do is I tried to see it from her point of view.”	“I haven't had it to where she has said no, for example, without making me see a bigger picture.”
Limited in Final Decision Making	“Sometimes it's challenging only because in a middle space position like this, you're hesitant sometimes to make a decision....”	“Final decisions are hers whatever the thing is, whatever it is.”	“Those big decisions I would never make without consulting.”
Demanding Job	I think the biggest challenge I have in my position is the breadth of the things that I'm responsible for. Just testing alone can take over your life. I've been in 10 webinars in the last two weeks. Just the breadth... The depth is not what's challenging. It's the breadth of it. It's just the wide range of different things that I'm responsible for.”	“Like I said I'm constantly given additional duties... but is that demanding? Of course.”	“Yes. I do think it is [demanding]. There's constantly decisions, plans, paperwork, deadlines, meetings, things that have to be met, things that have to be completed in a timely manner.”
Change in Relationships	“I still have great relationships with those people, but I have had to ...purposefully pull back from that.”	“Changing some of those relationships, people who I served with as principals with we couldn't have that same communication.”	“Those interpersonal relationships change somewhat.”
Missing Student Interaction	“It was the hardest thing to me when I left the classroom and went to a leadership position, because I initially felt like my impact on students was diminishing.”		“That's the sad thing about this position. I don't have nearly the interaction that I used to. That was probably one of the harder things that very first year.”

Table 6

*Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents' Challenges Sustaining Their Position*

Theme	Pearl	Shirley	Kerrie
Opinions Respected but Not Acted Upon	“This particular superintendent, if he doesn't agree with the way I've done something, he'll come in, we'll sit, and talk about it. He'll say, this is where I'm coming from, and this is why... sometimes he'll say no, I'm not going to do this, and we'll say okay.”	“It made me feel that, and it was a discipline decision, but it made me feel that I should've been more, it was a learning experience.”	“Yes, there have been some that have not been accepted and you have to understand the process. You may not like it but then in the end he is my superior and I will support what he has recommended.”
Limited in Final Decision Making	“Decision making, recommendations, of course the superintendent makes the decisions.”	“Pretty much when I speak I can speak pretty much definitely and when in doubt I'll ask him [superintendent].”	“Well, the final decision is his [superintendent's] and if it's something that's going to have to be something that I don't feel like I have the authority to make that decision, I'm going to take it to him.”
Demanding job	“You are expected to be at lots of things in lots of times of the day. Things that you have on your desk may not get done today. You may be here until five o'clock, and some days you've got a football game to go to or a band concert or multiple things, a board meeting to go to at night, so you have many time frames that may not be your own.”	“I think it can be demanding. There's so many moving pieces to make those best decisions happen for kids that does get demanding.”	“The stress of changing gears when you're doing so many programs I started off at 7:30 this morning I switched gears six times before you got here not in one particular program but in 6 different issues that I was dealing with, never a dull moment.”
Change in Relationships	“Probably the fact that it's a lonely position... In this position, you either talk to the superintendent or the other deputy.”	“You have to establish professional lines that can't be crossed either by me or by them because of your role as an assistant superintendent... I guess the big thing is making sure everybody understands what those lines are.”	“Your relationships change you're almost in an isolated group.”

**Analysis of Facilitating Factors of Female Assistant Superintendents**

The first part of the second research question pertained to the facilitating factors cited by female assistant superintendents in obtaining their positions. Research sub-

question 2a was the following: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining their positions? The findings are presented for the two cases in the following order: novice female assistant superintendents and veteran female assistant superintendents.

**Novice female assistant superintendents' facilitating factors obtaining their position.** Seven themes emerged from the novice female assistant superintendents' responses to the interview questions regarding facilitating factors they described in obtaining their position which is displayed in Table 7. The results revealed that all three novice female assistant superintendents experienced all but two of the same themes describing facilitating factors obtaining their position as assistant superintendent. Both Vanessa and Jasmine's revealed the facilitating factor that they were groomed for the assistant superintendent position. Both Tessie and Vanessa's shared experiences that reflect the facilitating factor of trusting their informal mentor. The themes have quotes supplied from participants that provide thick, rich description to support the theme.

***Prepared by education and experience.*** The novice female assistant superintendents believed that they did experience facilitating factors in obtaining their position as assistant superintendent. Tessie also believed her education was a facilitating factor in her obtaining the assistant superintendency. In fact, she stated that everyone who has held that position has held a doctorate with the exception of one person. Tessie stated:

As far as a specific degree, here, you pretty much need a doctorate to sit in this position, when you look at us traditionally. Now, we have had one example, well, since my reign here where the person either didn't have a doctorate or wasn't

pursuing. We had one assistant superintendent that started with an Ed.S. but was pursuing the doctorate when she was chosen for the position. I knew it certainly would help facilitate me getting this job.

Tessie exclaimed that she believed her experiences also prepared her for the assistant superintendency. When asked what facilitating factors helped her obtain the assistant superintendent position, Tessie explained:

I think, again, my experiences here would be the biggest facilitating factor. My rich background, to me, is my greatest asset in this position. By that, what I mean is I've taught middle school, I've taught high school, I've been a high school assistant principal, I've been an elementary principal. I've been at all levels. For me, I think it's just those rich experiences and that I've had an opportunity to serve a lot of different levels.

Vanessa agreed that education was a facilitating factor obtaining this job. She stated:

I think it's a combination of things. I think education is a portion of it. I say that because I also have a degree in psychology which helps you to deal with people, and personalities, and understanding those things. I never thought after the couple of years I tried to use that, that I would ever need it again. It is key in this role, believe it or not, just understanding human behavior, and why people do the things that they do. I'm going to be honest with you. The leadership training that I received at one southeastern university was awesome for me. It really was. It gave me a different viewpoint on what I thought it meant to be a leader.

Vanessa also cited her principal experience as a facilitating factor obtaining the assistant superintendent job.

I'm going to be honest with you. Being a principal prepared me for this job. When you're in a principal's role, you deal with everything under the sun. You deal with the personnel, the children, the parent complaints, the selecting of your staff, the non-renewal of your staff, and like I said, two very different kinds of middle schools where I served as principal. So I had the opportunity, and I was afforded the opportunity to know and to learn all different kinds of people that I would have to interact with. I'm going to be honest with you. Knowing how to handle people, I think, that's where I probably learned to be a listener because when you're dealing with parents you ought to listen to what their concerns are even when you don't want to which has been invaluable in this position.

Like Tessie and Vanessa, Jasmine also felt that her education was a facilitating factor for obtaining her job as assistant superintendent. Jasmine voiced: "I think your experiences throughout your education or professional education helps." In regards to experience contributing to her obtaining the assistant superintendency, she agreed stating "I do think all the prior experiences put together help you survive."

***Promoted within.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared experiences about being promoted within the organization that reflected a facilitating factor obtaining their position. First, they all knew the organization prior to being hired as assistant superintendent. When asked whether she had to learn the organization, Tessie stated, "Not to a great extent for me, because of my just long tenure here. You know, I sort of



knew what this looked like and what this role encompassed, so I didn't have to do that to a great deal.” Like Tessie, Vanessa stated:

I felt like I knew the organization. Like I said I've been in the district for a long time, so I know most of the people in this district. I'm not from Visual Learning County, but I grew up here professionally. I've grown up in this system professionally. I'm not a native of Visual Learning County, but I've grown here professionally.

Similarly, Jasmine divulged, “Having been here for quite a while and developing those relationships with people helped a great deal.”

In addition to already knowing the organization, Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all held positions in the district prior to becoming assistant superintendent. When asked how she had worked in this district, what she did prior to becoming assistant superintendent, and how long she was in each of these roles, Tessie replied:

This is my 24th year in the district, so I've been here for quite a long time. All right, when I first started here, I was a middle school social studies teacher. I taught seventh and eighth grade social studies. I was in that role for approximately nine years. Then, I transferred to our high school mid-year and taught 10th grade United States history, solely taught for three years. My fourth year at the high school, I was part-time assistant principal in charge of curriculum and instruction, and I still taught a class of US history. So three blocks a day, I was in the office as a principal, as a leader, and in the other block, I was teaching still. I stayed only in that part-time position for one year. The next year that position became full-time,

and I was assistant principal full-time at the high school for five years. After that, I went to Taxonomy Elementary, which is our grade three through five school. I was principal at Taxonomy Elementary when I transferred here in March. I was finishing my fourth year, so not quite four years when I came here in March of this year.

When asked how long she had worked in this district, what she did prior to becoming assistant superintendent, and how long she was in each of these roles, Vanessa responded:

I'm working on year 28. I have an interesting story. I think I've done almost everything in the district. I started off as a teacher's aide, believe it or not, for about three years. I was working on my certification to become a teacher. From there, I was hired right after I graduated with my certificate, and I became a teacher. I was a teacher for about twelve, thirteen years. I started at an elementary school. I've taught third grade, then I taught middle school, and I taught math, and I taught English. I even taught in an elementary setting. I taught social studies for one year, and that was a bit much for me. I'm just really not a social studies kind of girl. I'm more math and English. I've also taught science, believe it or not, in elementary school, but most of my time was spent teaching math and English. After I was a teacher, then I became a math coach. I served at an elementary school, and I worked strictly with teachers to help them learn great strategies to teach mathematics to elementary school students. I did that for three years. From there, I worked on my certification in administration. As soon as I finished that summer, I was hired as an assistant principal. This is the funniest story. I was an

assistant principal for one year at a middle school, and I never thought that anybody should be an assistant principal one year, and then become the principal. I actually made a very public statement that you would be a fool to do that because you don't know enough. The next day, I was the principal of the school. I served as a principal at two different middle schools. One was a magnet school, and then one was a traditional school. I did three at one, and one at the other, so I was a principal about four, maybe five years. Then I became a personnel specialist in the Office of Human Resources. I was a personnel specialist which really meant that I just dealt with personnel at the time. I had all of the secondary schools in Visual Learning County, and I dealt with just making sure they were fully staffed. That was my primary responsibility. I only did that for a year. Then they made me the Director of Human Resources. I was a director maybe three years, somewhere in there. Then I became the assistant superintendent of human resources. I know my time frames are slightly off because like I said, I've done a variety of things from classified to certified to where I am currently.

Vanessa was asked whether all her positions were held in the same district, she added, “Yes, all in Visual Learning School District. I grew up here. I'm not from Visual Learning County, but I grew up here professionally.” Like Tessie and Vanessa, Jasmine shared a similar experience when asked how long had she worked in this district, what she did prior to becoming assistant superintendent, and how long she was in each of these roles, Jasmine replied:

Since 2004, from 2005 to 2014, I was the counselor at the middle school and the school psychometrist for the system. The year prior, I was a high school math

teacher. Three years prior, I worked in a different school system as a middle school math teacher. My first year, I was here in this system for three years as a math teacher, then 2005 to 2014, middle school counselor school psychometrist.

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all stated their work ethic was known in their school districts. When asked whether knowing your work ethic helped the superintendent see your qualities and helped place you in this position, Tessie replied, “I do. I absolutely do.” Likewise, Vanessa stated:

I do, and the reason that I say that is because at the time before she became the superintendent, she was the director over professional development, and before that she was an executive director, so she knew my work because she worked with principals. She knew my work as a principal, although, she was the one over elementary, and I worked at a secondary school. I worked at a middle school. She still made visits to my school because I did have sixth grade in my building, so they would also check on sixth grade which is really an elementary grade, so she knew of my work [ethic].

When asked whether knowing your work ethic helped the superintendent see your qualities and helped place you in this position, Jasmine responded, “Oh yes, he had been here a long time and knew.”

***Received mentoring.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared similar experiences regarding receiving mentoring as a facilitating factor to obtain their position. When reminiscing about the mentoring she received by her hiring principal who helped her obtain the position, Tessie shared:

I think this is an indirect reason why I obtained this position. I don't know if this is what you're asking for, but I think it's much more indirect than direct. My principal for most of my teaching career and then the person who chose me for my first AP position would definitely be one of two people that I would point out as my mentor. He was also the person, and I think this is so key. I'm going to go out on a limb and say, I think it's so key for women leaders, in particular. He was the first person to come to me and say, 'You know what? You've got some skills, and you've got some qualities that would make you a good administrator.' I think his mentoring of me initially was just a recognition that, hey, you might have something to offer, and think about this. Then once he actually hired me in a position, by the way, he was very encouraging about me going back and getting my leadership certification. Once he hired me, then it was a much more formal mentoring process. He was constantly teaching me, okay, if you're managing this type of situation, whether it's discipline, or making an instructional decision, or guiding teachers in professional learning, this is the best practice. Try this, or have you thought about this? It was a much more formal. It kind of started out informal and then became a much more formal mentoring process.

In addition to referencing her principal as part of a mentoring relationship that helped her obtain her job, Tessie also referenced her mentoring relationship with her former assistant superintendent. When continuing to explain whether a mentoring relationship helping her obtain the assistant superintendency, Tessie shared:

The other person that I would point to, and this one would be more informal, was our assistant superintendent who was here when I was actually an assistant

principal. She's female, so we had a lot in common. She actually sits on our Board of Education now, and she was also a member of my doctoral dissertation committee.

When asked was mentoring or a mentoring relationship involved in you obtaining this position, Vanessa stated:

I would say that my mentoring was more informal. I say that because the two people who were the people that I considered my mentors, and me being their mentee. First of all, I asked for that help on my own, although, the assistant superintendent prior to me was a mentor. It was still not formal. She just kind of took me under her wings because she saw potential, I think. I think, sometimes, they don't realize what a big role they played. When I say invaluable, these are people that you can call when you're in the middle of the night, and you can't figure out a solution.

When reminiscing about her relationship with her former assistant superintendent, Vanessa added, "As she was getting ready to leave she said, 'You know, you need to apply for my position.' She constantly encouraged me." Vanessa added, "I think I learned so much from her. I think that's what helped me to get this job." Continuing to discuss the mentoring she received when obtaining the assistant superintendency, Vanessa shared mentoring provided her support. Vanessa stated:

When I say invaluable, these are people that you can call when you're in the middle of the night, and you can't figure out a solution. These are people that you can go sit on their porch, and just spill your guts, and you don't have to worry

about hearing it anymore. These are the people who you're going to, you know the advice that they're giving you is truly just advice. You still can make your own decision. To me, I think, that's a true mentor. They're not trying to do the job for you. They're still going to respect you if you choose to do something different, but they're going to give you their best opinion about whatever that situation is, but not only that, the trust factor was really key for me to choose people that I could trust to ask things of.

When continuing to discuss that mentoring provided her with wisdom, knowledge, guidance and protection, Vanessa added:

Just that emotional piece, that being able to stand piece. All of these people are considerably older than I, some 10 years, and just that wisdom. Things that at my age, at the time, I didn't have that knowledge base, or that insight, or sometimes even that foresight. They could give me that guidance, and sometimes even that protection.

When asked if mentoring or a mentoring relationship was involved in them obtaining their position, Jasmine stated, "I don't think it hurt." Jasmine also revealed that her former assistant superintendent informed her he was retiring. Jasmine stated, "The person who had the position before me, I worked with him in my position as psychometrist and he let me know he was retiring." Jasmine also shared that her former assistant superintendent would also serve as a teacher to provide additional information for learning how to do his job. Jasmine stated, "He was definitely more teaching."

***Networked effectively.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all networked effectively to obtain their position. They all knew the hiring superintendent prior to their hire as assistant superintendent. Thus, their ability to network with the superintendent was a facilitating factor in obtaining their job. When asked if she knew the hiring superintendent, Tessie responded “I did know the hiring superintendent.” Similarly, Vanessa shared, “She [the superintendent] was the director over professional development, and before that she was an executive director, so she knew my work [ethic] because she worked with principals.” Vanessa also shared the network provided encouragement. Vanessa stated, “She [former assistant superintendent] just always encouraged me. As she was getting ready to leave she said, ‘You know, you need to apply for my position.’” When asked if she knew the hiring superintendent, Jasmine responded, “He was my superintendent. He had been a former high school principal who was actually my teacher when I was in high school.”

***Embraced career change.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all stated they embraced career change as a facilitating factor obtaining their position. They all aspired to the assistant superintendency because they desired change. Tessie stated, “I want to be in a spot where I can impact as many students as possible.” Vanessa stated, “I see some gaps. I see some things that I think we should be doing, so I thought just the opportunity to improve the organization not that it was so bad.” Jasmine stated, “I think I had really gotten bored in my position. That sounds horrible, but I had been in that position for several years, and it had almost become routine.”

***Groomed for advancement.*** Both Vanessa and Jasmine were groomed for advancement. Vanessa and Jasmine both shared that someone prepared them for the



assistant superintendency. Vanessa shared her experience with her hiring principal and Jasmine shared her experience with her previous assistant superintendent. Vanessa reminisced how she was groomed for advancement stating:

My first principal prepared me for this position. The person who hired me as a teacher was actually one of my interim superintendents. When I was a teacher, she would actually have me doing things that I could say ‘Why are you asking me to do that?’ She just kept saying ‘I see you here, and I never did, so all of those relationships in some form or fashion prepared me for this.

Jasmine remembered a similar experience in preparation to advance. Jasmine remembered stating:

When he [former assistant superintendent] would be completing the compliance certification forms for example, or when he would be proofing IEPs ahead of time, the draft copies, he would find a problem and instead of tagging the case manager, he would tag me in the emails also for example, and point out things that were not [appropriate].

***Trusted informal mentors.*** Both Tessie and Vanessa shared they trusted their informal mentors. Tessie stated she trusted the prior assistant superintendent and has a personal and professional relationship with her mentor. Vanessa shared she trusted her mentors who would also guide her. Tessie stated:

We [Tessie and her former assistant superintendent] have a very good relationship, trusting relationship. It's professional and it's personal. We developed a personal relationship over time, too. I trust her opinion. She's still one

I would go to and say, ‘Hey, what do you think about this? Am I on the right track?’ or, ‘What would you do?’ or, ‘What did you do?’ She's been retired now for, oh gosh, maybe seven or eight years, but I still trust her. I would say that's another kind of informal mentoring relationship.

When revealing the trust that exists with her informal mentors, Vanessa proclaimed her informal mentors are:

Just people I could trust, people that I knew would not say what I wanted to hear. People that would guide me in the right direction. People who would spank my hand if it needed to be spanked and would still love me at the end. They're still going to respect you if you choose to do something different, but they're going to give you their best opinion about whatever that situation is, but not only that, the trust factor was really key for me to choose people that I could trust to ask things of.

**Veteran female assistant superintendents’ facilitating factors obtaining their position.** Six themes emerged from the veteran female assistant superintendents’ responses to the interview questions regarding facilitating factors they described in obtaining their position which are displayed in Table 8. The themes revealed were prepared by education and experience, promoted within, received mentoring, networked effectively, embraced career change, and participated in direct leadership experience as a teacher. The themes have quotes supplied from participants that provide thick, rich description to support the theme.

*Prepared by education and experience.* The veteran female assistant superintendents believed that they did experience facilitating factors in obtaining their position as assistant superintendent. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie stated their facilitating factors consisted of being prepared by education and experience, being promoted from within, receiving mentoring, networking effectively, and embracing career change. Only Pearl and Kerrie voluntarily participated in leadership experience as a teacher.

When the researcher asked Pearl what facilitating factors assisted her in obtaining this position and whether she pursued a specific degree to help obtain the assistant superintendency, she divulged:

The answer to the degree is yes, because I already had a masters and an Ed.S. in subject area, and I knew that if I wanted to be higher than a teacher/principal, I would have to get the next level of degree. That's what made me seek a higher degree, was knowing I needed to be prepared.

In regards to experience being a facilitating factor obtaining the assistant superintendent position, Pearl disclosed:

I think being principal is probably the best preparation because it helps you deal with a variety of people and a variety of roles. Being a deputy superintendent, you learn very quickly to build on your experience base. How you deal with people, how you interact, relationships, collaborations. All of that, you learn when you have to run a school, and when you come to a central office position at this level. You have to learn how to deal with people, how to work with them, very similar things you have to learn.

Shirley also felt that both education and experience were facilitating factors that assisted her in obtaining this position. Shirley divulged:

In addition to official training for a degree in education, taking leadership courses, superintendent courses, I think on the job training. I was a principal that was always very concerned about school budgets. It was important to me to learn the budgeting process for local funds, federal dollars received as well as our state funds. I was also a principal who always sought out creative instructional solutions to problems in the building. I do that here, just on a larger scale. I do it for all schools as opposed to one. I think experience. I think education. Some of my college classes I think provided some perspective on senior level positions in school districts. Research and things like that, I've had to do along the way in the graduate programs. Education and experience I guess.

Kerrie also believed that education served as a facilitating factor obtaining the assistant superintendency. Kerrie proclaimed, "I was already pursuing my Educational Specialist Degree, but yes, I do think that helped as far as preparing me for additional roles." In regards to experience serving as a facilitating factor obtaining the assistant superintendent position, she proclaimed:

I did a lot of leadership things at my school before coming here, and then when I came to central office, I really embraced the opportunity to learn how central office works. You know the funding, the earning of the foundation program. You know physical years. There is so much at the school level that you don't understand of how the central office works so that really helped me into having

opportunities to demonstrate my leadership into growing into that assistant superintendent's role. The experience of working both on the school level and at central office as a coordinator combined acted as facilitating factors obtaining the assistant superintendency.

***Promoted within.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared experiences about being promoted within the organization that reflected a facilitating factor obtaining their position. First, they all knew the organization prior to being hired as assistant superintendent. When asked whether she had to learn the organization, Pearl stated, "For me, I already knew the organization, because I'd been in the district so long." Like Pearl, Shirley stated:

I already pretty well knew the organization having come through it through high school. Starting my career as a teacher in this same school district, being from the area. That just lends you a lot of information that you can't get otherwise. Just being in the community and having that part of the schools, at least one school as a student, you just get a whole different perspective that nobody can give you. I didn't feel I had a lot to learn about the organization.

Similarly, Kerrie stated, "Well, I am as we discussed with my years of service here, I am very invested in this school district."

In addition to already knowing the organization, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all held positions in the district prior to becoming assistant superintendent. When asked how long had she worked in this district, what she did prior to becoming assistant superintendent, and how long she was in each of these roles, Pearl replied:

Over forty years, I was a classroom teacher for twelve. I was an assistant principal for two. I was middle school junior high principal for four and a half. I was a K12 principal for four and a half. I was a high school principal for, these are different schools, for four years. I came down to the board as a school group director for three years, and then we went through a state takeover. I went back and was a high school principal for eleven years, and then have been down here as a deputy superintendent for six.

Shirley shared a similar experience exclaiming:

For twenty-four years, immediately prior to this position, I was an elementary principal. I did that for eight years. Before that, I spent one year as an instructional resource specialist. Prior to that I was a classroom teacher for four years. I think I've been in this position eleven years instead of ten. That would give me twenty-four now that I'm adding up years, eleven years instead of ten.

Kerrie revealed an experience alike that of Pearl and Shirley. Kerrie divulged, “27 years, I was a physical education teacher for 17 years. I had a short tenure as a principal at the elementary school which really was an interim position, but it was less than a year. I was coordinator for two years.”

Both Shirley and Kerrie stated that their work ethic was known. Shirley stated: I think my work ethic. I think a school board and a superintendent that I've known and who's known me and understands my work ethic attending to tasks. Being productive. Being a productive employee. I think all of those things factored in because you can have the experience. You can have the education, but if you don't

have the work ethic, then you won't really be considered for a position like this assistant superintendency.

Kerrie responded with a similar experience proclaiming her superintendent knowledge of her work ethic contributed to her obtaining her position stating:

I also think his knowing my capabilities played a factor in it too; working together in an office, you're privileged to see the products and the work ethic of how someone operates every day. Did I know anything about federal programs at the time? Did I know anything about special education at the time? No ma'am, I did not. But I think my work ethic and my ability to show that I had leadership qualities enabled me to acquire the position.

***Received mentoring.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared similar experiences regarding receiving mentoring as a facilitating factor to obtain their position. When Pearl was asked about whether mentoring was involved in her obtaining this position, Pearl explained:

Probably yes, it was not formal. It would have probably been informal. The person who supervised me made the comment or was the one that said you need to seek the job. He was the one who said to me that the job is there, you have the skill set, and he encouraged me to go on and put in for the job. The value was, I think females tend to not, we tend to look at our own weaknesses and think maybe we're not as qualified or maybe there's someone better qualified. At least I did. He was the one who said, 'Look, you're as qualified, if not more, than most of

these folks. If you don't put in, you'll never have an opportunity.' He was sort of the push behind.

Reminiscing about the role mentoring played in her obtaining her job, Pearl added:

I think it provided someone that when I first came into the position and was doubtful or hesitant which way to step or which way to go, it gave me an ear of someone who had had experience at the central level who could say, 'You might need to watch this pitfall or that's not a bad person to go to for advice,' just another ear.

When Shirley was asked about whether mentoring was involved in her obtaining this position, she explained:

Probably, I say that because my superintendent is kind of my informal mentor. We didn't have a formal mentoring relationship, but I've known him since high school. He's just evolved as my mentor and always gave me good advice about career choices. I'm sure knowing him, having him play that role in my professional life did lend to me being considered for this position. I think number one, there's always someone you can go to. I think that's important, that has been in your position and filled those shoes. That's important. A mentor also helps to create a non-threatening environment, and I think that is important especially in the role I play now with finding creative solutions and innovative things that have not been tried. You're free to do that. I think there's a lot of value in knowing you have someone to go to and in knowing that you have freedom to perform your job the way that you want to do it.



When Kerrie was asked about the value of mentoring in regards to her obtaining this position, Kerrie explained, “It provided me confidence.” She added, “I’m still mentored along the way. I don’t think you can be mentored enough. I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis.”

*Networked effectively.* Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all networked effectively to obtain their position. When asked if she knew the hiring superintendent, Pearl responded, “Yes, he was my supervisor. He was the superintendent when I was principal at the school.” These networks led to Pearl also being encouraged to apply for the assistant superintendent position. She explained:

It was suggested that I had the experience background to be able to provide assistance to principals at all grade levels. The person who supervised me made the comment or was the one that said you need to seek the job. He was the one who said to me that the job is there, you have the skill set, and he encouraged me to go on and put in for the job. He was the one that said the job is out there, you need to go look for it. You've got the credentials. You've got the degree. You need to seek it.

When asked if that [relationship with superintendent] is a male relationship that helped her obtain this position, Shirley responded, “I’d say so.” When asked whether the superintendent approached her about the assistant superintendent vacancy, Shirley replied, “He did.” When asked whether she thought the relationship with the superintendent helped her obtain this position, Kerrie responded, “Oh absolutely.” Kerrie added “I was approached by my superintendent and we talked about the responsibilities

and what that title looked like what my responsibilities would be, how we wanted our office to operate.”

***Embraced career change.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all stated they embraced career change as a facilitating factor obtaining their position. They all aspired to the assistant superintendency because they desired change. Pearl stated, “At the time, that position was a challenge.” Similarly, Shirley stated, “I was ready for something different, a different challenge.” Kerrie added, “I could make a bigger difference.”

***Participated in direct leadership experience as a teacher.*** Both Pearl and Kerrie volunteered to participate in leadership activities at their local schools as teachers. Pearl stated, “I found myself in the school helping my principal and my assistant principal handling a lot of their problems, and thought, why am I handling the problems and not getting paid or the credit to do it, so I decided maybe I needed to handle them for myself.” Like Pearl, Kerrie shared that same experience. Kerrie divulged, “I had leadership experience at my school, but I didn’t have the title.”

Table 7

*Novice Female Assistant Superintendents' Facilitating Factors Obtaining Their Position*

Theme	Tessie	Vanessa	Jasmine
<b>Prepared by Education and Experience</b>	“You pretty much need a doctorate to sit in this position [and] I think it's just those rich experiences and that I've had an opportunity to serve a lot of different levels.”	“I think education is a portion of it [and] being a principal prepared me for this job.”	“I think your experiences throughout your education or professional education helps. I do think all the prior experiences put together help you survive.”
<b>Promoted Within</b>	“My long tenure here, I knew what this looked like.”	“I've been in the district for a long time, so I know most of the people in this district. I've grown up in this system professionally.”	“Having been here [in the district] for quite a while and developing those relationships with people.”
<b>Received Mentoring</b>	“I think this is an indirect reason why I obtained this position.”	“They don't realize what a big role they played. When I say invaluable, these are people you can call...”	When asked whether the mentoring relationship helped obtain this position, she replied, “I don't think it hurt.”
<b>Networked Effectively</b>	“I did know the hiring superintendent.”	“She [the superintendent] was the director over professional development, and before that she was an executive director, so she knew my work [ethic] because she worked with principals.”	“He was my superintendent. He had been a former high school principal who was actually my teacher when I was in high school.”
<b>Embraced Career Change</b>	“I want to be in a spot where I can impact as many students as possible.”	“I see some gaps. I see some things that I think we should be doing, so I thought just the opportunity to improve the organization.”	“I think I had really gotten bored in my position...but I had been in that position for several years.”
<b>Groomed for Advancement</b>		“When I was a teacher she would actually have me doing things that I would say, ‘Why are you asking me do that?’ She just kept saying ‘I see you here.’”	“Instead of tagging the case manager, he would tag me in the emails also... and point out things that were not appropriate.”
<b>Trusted Informal Mentor</b>	“We have a very good relationship, trusting relationship.”	“[My informal mentors are] just people I could trust.”	

Table 8

*Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents' Facilitating Factors Obtaining Their Position*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Pearl</b>	<b>Shirley</b>	<b>Kerrie</b>
<b>Prepared by Education and Experience</b>	“The answer to the degree is yes [and] I think being principal is probably the best preparation.”	“I think experience. I think education.”	“My Education Specialist Degree [and] the experience of working both on the school level and at central office as a coordinator combined acted as facilitating factors obtaining the assistant superintendency.”
<b>Promoted Within</b>	“For me, I already knew the organization because I’d been in the district so long.”	“I already pretty well knew the organization having come through it through high school.”	“My years of service here, I am very invested in this school district.”
<b>Received Mentoring</b>	“He was sort of the push behind [to apply for the assistant superintendent position].”	When asked about the value of the mentoring you received, she responded, “There’s always someone you can go to. I think that’s important.”	“It [mentoring] provided me confidence.”
<b>Networked Effectively</b>	When asked did you know the hiring superintendent, she responded, “Yes, he was my supervisor. He was the superintendent when I was principal at the school.”	When asked would you say that that [relationship with superintendent] is a male relationship that’s helped you obtain this position, she responded, “I’d say so.”	When asked do you think that relationship with him [superintendent] helped you obtain this position, she responded, “Oh absolutely.”
<b>Embraced Career Change</b>	“At the time, that position was a challenge.”	“I was ready for something different, a different challenge.”	“I could make a bigger difference.”
<b>Participated in Direct Leadership Experience as Teacher</b>	“I found myself in the school helping my principal and my assistant principal handling a lot of their problems, and thought, why am I handling the problems and not getting paid or the credit to do it, so I decided maybe I needed to handle them for myself.”		“I had leadership experience at my school, but I didn’t have the title.”

The second part of the second research question pertained to the facilitating factors cited by female assistant superintendents in sustaining their positions. Research sub-question 2a was the following: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining their positions? The findings are presented for the two cases in the following order: novice female assistant superintendents and veteran female assistant superintendents.

**Novice female assistant superintendents' facilitating factors sustaining their position.** Four themes emerged from the novice female assistant superintendents' responses to the interview questions regarding facilitating factors they described in sustaining their position which is displayed in Table 9. The results revealed that facilitating factors were associated with all novice female assistant superintendents in sustaining their position. The novice female assistant superintendents had acquired skills, maintained positive relationships, were involved in networking, and valued mentoring. The themes have a quote supplied from participants that provide thick, rich description to support the themes.

***Acquired skills.*** The novice female assistant superintendents believed possessing effective communication abilities helped sustain their positions as assistant superintendents. Novice female assistant superintendents acquired skills and supports that helped them successfully sustain their positions as assistant superintendent. All novice assistant superintendents shared they had acquired the skill of listening. Utilizing the skill of listening, Tessie ensures positive relationships with her principals. Tessie explained:

There are times when they're just ready for me to say, 'Okay, Tessie, what do you want us to do?' Yes, but I pride myself on listening to them first, unless it's a student safety issue, like I said. I mean, there's times when you don't have time to gather input. You've got to make a decision, because you've got a kid that's depending on you. If they feel like they've had input, they being principals and leaders in schools, even if you don't make the decision they want you to make, a lot of times they can live with it if they felt like you at least listened to them. Just listen to me. I think they respect that somebody's ultimately got to make a final decision.

Furthermore, when asked about additional skills needed to sustain her position, Tessie responded, "I have to have opportunities to stay abreast of what's new and what's best practice. You have to. I cannot do this job if I don't know what the classroom should look like." Vanessa shared a similar experience regarding the importance of being able to listen. She stated, "I listen to what everybody has to say that's involved in the situation, and then I use discernment to make the best decision for whatever that particular situation is." Vanessa also exclaimed, "The opportunity for our employees to feel like they were heard, and listened to because I have a listening ear. Hopefully, that's what I've done in this district." She further stated:

I listen to people. I have a big smile, a listening ear, kind of a quirky personality, not the traditional assistant superintendent, especially, for human resources. I think, that's where I probably learned to be a listener because when you're dealing with parents, you ought to listen to what their concerns are even when you don't want to which has been invaluable in this position. I'm not quick to judge. I'm not

quick to make a decision unless it requires a quick decision. I listen to what everybody has to say that's involved in the situation, and then I use discernment to make the best decision for whatever that particular situation.

When asked about additional skills needed to sustain the position, Vanessa continued:

Like I said, the listening piece. I'm a talker if you haven't figured that out already, but listening is a hard skill. It was hard for me, although, I have that training from my degree in psychology, still listening was a hard skill for me. It's a difference when you're truly listening to someone, and actually hearing what they're saying, and just participating, and sitting there, and hearing the words, understanding the words. So that's the one, I think, I would hope to find. I can read a book, and learn laws, and policies, and all of that. That's easy, but the listening piece of it, and understanding.

Similarly, in regards to the importance of being a good listener, Jasmine stated:

Sometimes, things are said, true or not true. Typically not true in a negative way and again you're that positive spokesperson for whatever the situation is. It's very similar to what we were just saying about the principals. You listen. They vent. They complain and then we reach a, hopefully, positive conclusion. It's the same way with the public, whether it's parents or simply the community members.

Furthermore, Vanessa, and Jasmine cited their ability to plan as a facilitating factor that helps them sustain their position. Vanessa shared:

I'm going to be honest with you I had to learn some different skills. It's different from being a leader, and a follower. I'm a planner, so I've made a plan. I did, and I've consulted with people who have been here. When I say been here, not so much in Visual Arts County, but people that held this role in other places. How did you get your place to do that or how could I do this?

Likewise, Jasmine stated, "Today with our principals meeting, it was on dyslexia. My superintendent and I were there, and then the school principals and counselors. I had our chosen plan ready."

Both Tessie and Jasmine cited their ability to multitask as a facilitating factor that helps them sustain their position as assistant superintendent. Tessie stated, "You'd better be a multi-tasker. You've got to be able to multitask." Likewise, Jasmine stated, "I think it's constantly being able to go from one thing to another, because it's not just one hat that we wear up here, being a small system."

In addition to possessing the abilities to listen, plan, and multi-task, both Tessie and Jasmine cited being able to prioritize was a facilitating factor that helps them sustain their position as assistant superintendent. Tessie stated:

The other thing is time management in terms of you can't let this paperwork and computer work take you to a point where you're out of touch with schools because you're not out there and in schools. What I try to do is, I try to be in schools at least three days a week in some capacity, whether it's going to see instructional practice and take some pictures and tweet them or whatever. I try to be at an assembly, or at the pep rally, or just somewhere where I'm visible, where teachers



see me. To be quite honest, I need that time with kids, because I love the kids so much. It gives me, I call it, my kid fix. I get to go be with my kids.

Similarly, Jasmine responded, “Being able to prioritize and maintain timelines and due dates is huge.”

Furthermore, Tessie and Vanessa cited that their positive personality helps them sustain their positions. When discussing whether there is a power struggle between upper management and her, Tessie stated:

Not at all. I don't ever feel like I'm in a power struggle. Some of that's my personality, too. Because if he says, ‘No, we're going to go a different route,’ I say, ‘Okay, that works for me.’ I mean, it doesn't have to be my way. I'm not an it's-got-to-be-my-way kind of girl. I think if I had that personality, it would be harder, but I don't, so that helps a lot.

Similarly, Vanessa explained that her personality helps to prevent any power struggle stating:

In all honesty, I'm so reflective in nature, I was not offended by it, but what I did do is, I tried to see it from her point of view. I have real tough skin. Like I said, I have a big smile, but I have very tough skin, so things like that don't agitate me. I don't take it personally because at the end of the day, I realize who she is, and who I am. I understand her role, and I understand my role.

Lastly, Tessie and Vanessa explained that a facilitating factor in sustaining their position is that they possessed the skill of being trustworthy. Tessie stated she has a trusting relationship with her principals explaining:

My rich background, to me, is my greatest asset in this position. By that, what I mean is I've taught middle school; I've taught high school. I've been a high school assistant principal; I've been an elementary principal. I've been at all levels. I think what that does for me is that when I have an elementary principal inquire about something, they trust me because I've been there. It's not just the former high school assistant principal telling them what I think. They respect my opinion because they know I've walked in their shoes. I think I have a level of trust among teachers and leaders there.

Also, the superintendent trusts her to make decisions. Tessie stated: "He trusts me to make decisions." Tessie remembered a past conversation with her superintendent revealing:

Finally, he did say to me one day, 'Look, I trust you. I hired you to do curriculum and instruction. I trust you. Go do it.' Again, now, he will always come back and say, 'Don't leave me in the dark. I trust you, but don't leave me in the dark. I've got to be able to talk intelligently if I'm asked about a decision.'

She added, "He can always overrule my curriculum and instruction decisions, but he trusts me to make those decisions." Furthermore, others trust her. Tessie stated she also has the ability to trust others stating, "I believe in delegation, so I assign tasks a whole lot. I trust my people to do what they're good at."

In addition to Tessie experiencing trustworthiness, Vanessa also shared a similar experience. Vanessa stated she has a trusting relationship with her principals explaining:

When you build relationships with people, before they act, they'll call you. Sometimes, you can prevent things because you do have a relationship with people. The way that I treat them is really important. Some things go away just because of the relationships that I build.

Also, the superintendent trusts Vanessa to make decisions. Vanessa stated: "I know what the vision is for the district. She trusts that I'm going to stay within that vision, and she just lets me go for it." Furthermore, others trust Vanessa. Vanessa added that people in the community trusts her and this has led to her being somewhat of a problem solver within the community. She stated, "Some people will say, 'Okay, I'll do this instead.' Rather than suing the district, 'I'll do this instead,' just because of the relationships that I build. I think they trust me, I do." Vanessa stated she also has the ability to trust others. When sharing her experience about her relationship with her mentors, she stated, "The trust factor was really key for me to choose people that I could trust to ask things of."

***Maintained positive relationships.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine cited maintaining positive relationships as a factor in sustaining their position. Realizing the importance of relationships, they all identified pertinent relationships that have enabled them to be able to sustain their positions. When discussing the importance of relationships, Tessie stated,

The most important relationship is my relationship with the superintendent himself. That's got to be solid. Probably right behind that is my relationship with principals and understanding their realm and their needs in that position. I haven't mentioned this at all, but this is definitely a good spot. My clerical staff is really,

really important. Making them feel valued and respected is super important, because without their help, it would be very hard to succeed.

Vanessa considered every positive relationship a facilitating factor in sustaining her position. She expressed, “Every relationship that I can make helps me in this role.”

Jasmine cited that the most important relationships that are established are with parents and teachers. Jasmine stated, “The relationships with the parents and teachers are paramount.”

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all engaged in a shared leadership relationship with their superintendents. When sharing experiences regarding how decisions are made with her superintendent, Tessie stated, “Most of the time, he's going to say, ‘Let me see what Tessie thinks.’ I feel very respected in terms of my decision making in my lane, if that makes sense.” When asked about shared leadership made with her superintendent, Tessie voiced:

This is hard, because we consult a lot about a lot of things. He asks my opinion on personnel issues. He asks my opinion on financial issues, but at the end of the day, those are his decisions, if that makes sense. Now, I may give my opinion or, ‘Okay, now I think you're on the right track,’ or, ‘Have you considered this?’ but at the end of the day, personnel, finances, those kinds of, he's going to make those decisions. He can always overrule my curriculum and instruction decisions, but he trusts me to make those decisions.

When asked about shared leadership with her superintendent, Vanessa discussed how collaborative her superintendent was when making decisions. Vanessa stated:

She can make any of them on her own, actually, she could decide. Her way to do things is maybe a little different from most. Final decisions are hers whatever the thing is, whatever it is. She's one who like I say, I don't think she makes many of them alone. She tells us often, 'I hired you for a purpose, so I need to hear your thoughts. At the end of the day it is my decision, but I hired you for that purpose.' She really believes in collaboration.

When asked if there are any decisions she has to collaborate with the superintendent on first before making the final decisions, Jasmine commented, "I'm not sure, because we, thankfully we have a wonderful relationship to where she's supportive of whatever decisions."

***Involved in networking.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine cited their involvement in networking as a facilitating factor to sustaining their role as assistant superintendent.

When asked about networking, Tessie responded: "Absolutely, teachers, principals, other people in the position in other districts, all of that's really important." When speaking about past networking opportunities her mentor provided, Tessie explained,

Well, he made sure that every single year, I got to go to the national AP conference to network with other AP leaders in the whole United States. I learned so much from that, because I got ideas on how we could make our program more successful, how I could challenge my teachers, how I could support my teachers with professional learning.

When talking about the networking opportunities her superintendent has provided, Tessie exclaimed:

So he's been very good to put me out there to network. We had a district superintendents' meeting not too long ago, and I was the only assistant superintendent in the room. Everybody else, it was their supers. None of them had their assistants with them. That makes you feel good. It makes you feel valued.

When asked whether she believed that building networks was important to sustaining her position as assistant superintendent, Vanessa replied:

I do, couldn't make it without them. You can't build an island by yourself, and you can't think that you know everything. You can't do that. Some of the people that I serve, they give me the best insight on things. It may be a custodian, and I get this great insight. One thing about getting here earlier, the custodians are usually the next group of people to come in. Sometimes, just a motivational word.

When Vanessa was asked whether mentoring provided opportunities for networking, she responded:

Yes, they did because they put me in contact with people who are still practicing in fields that are related to what I actually do. When I say people who are still practicing, they're not retired. They're actually still in the education arena and very involved. For example, I'll give you a great example. Sometimes when we network, we forget about people who are real close to us like these surrounding counties. I have Vocal Arts School District which is now open which I really don't network with anybody there yet, but with Learning School District I do, with Academics School District, I do. My mentors help me to get to know some of those people, and kind of introduced us so that, sometimes, when people know

that you have a relationship with someone that they know, they're more open to give you good advice or to be a phone call away because they feel like you have some kind of connection. All three of these people are very well-known in Visual Arts School District, and outside of Visual Arts School District, so just being in their circles has helped me to network.

When asked whether building networks is important to sustaining her position as assistant superintendent, Jasmine responded, “Yes, when you do get to a point where you need a different viewpoint or you need some different experiences, having those numbers in your phone that you can call and discuss things with is wonderful.”

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all state they network with peers and colleagues. Tessie stated, “I do CCCC. I do the Visual State Best Practices Center Key Leaders Network. Then, I have teachers that do BBB. I also participate as a district liaison in HHH, so there's a lot of networking there and a lot of focus on curriculum and instruction.” In regards to networking with peers and colleagues, Vanessa explained:

Not only just across the district, but across the state. I'll always try to talk to people with districts just like ours because we have similar problems. I'm quick to call Success County or Strategic City, and sometimes Differentiation District. Then some of the smaller districts who may not have the problem, but who may have great practices, so the networking, and the collaboration amongst people in similar roles is something that I have to depend on.

When responding whether participating in networking with peers and colleagues has sustained her in this position, Jasmine responded:

Yes, we have our regional meetings. Talk to the county special education coordinator, and the county federal programs director. Not every day by any means, but we have a good rapport. Knowing how to follow the code to avoid legal issues is huge. I really think the networking is important. Networking even within our school system. Keeping those ties and staying on top of problems before they become bigger problems. Yes, when you do get to a point where you need a different viewpoint or you need some different experiences, having those numbers in your phone that you can call and discuss things with is wonderful.

Being a part of organizations has also enabled opportunities for networking.

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine cite organizations of which they are members that provides opportunities for networking. Tessie stated, “AAAA is big for me. I have a lot of great contacts and a great network there that I can always go to.” Vanessa stated being a member of organizations have also helped her sustain her position. Vanessa explained:

The ones that help me the most, of course, I'm a member of AAAA. Our professional organization is called ABABA. I'm a member of AAA. I'm going to be honest with you. Everybody thinks that AAA and human resources they usually clash big time, and before I held this position they did usually clash, but it has been a great growth tool for me. It has helped me to understand where they're coming from, so I make better decisions for employees. I know that they're on the side of the employee even when I can't be, but it is that relationship, and that organization. Believe it or not, we actually meet quarterly which is something different. The superintendent and I actually met a couple of weeks ago with the president of ABABA. She usually has me to sit in those meetings with her. We



met with AAA during the summer, and I sit in those meetings with her. We're building that relationship, and it's helping both of us to grow, I think, so we see both sides of the table.

When asked are you a member of any professional organizations that has helped you sustain your position as assistant superintendent, Jasmine responded: "I'm in AAAA."

***Valued mentoring.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all stated mentoring has proved valuable in sustaining their roles as assistant superintendents. When asked whether mentoring was needed to sustain her position, Tessie stated:

You got to have it, in my opinion, whether it's informal or formal. If you put yourself in an island or on an island as a leader, you're going to have a hard time succeeding, because this is such a collaborative business that we're in. You can't always rely on your own knowledge. I don't know everything. I do not. I don't mind saying, 'I have no clue.' I said that to a counselor just this very morning. We were talking about something related to testing. I'm a newbie, she's a newbie, and she asked me. I told her, 'I don't know, but I know people to call.' I don't mind asking questions. I just think that if you don't have some folks that you can depend on to give you honest opinions, to reel you in when you're off-course, I think it would be hard to succeed at this job.

Tessie added when discussing the mentoring needed to sustain her job:

I have to have opportunities to stay abreast of what's new and what's best practice. You have to. I cannot do this job if I don't know what the classroom should look like. As far as mentoring, I have a lot of informal mentoring relationships. Like I

said, I'm very good friends with the assistant superintendents in Success School District and Powerful Learning School District. Men that I've known for a long time that I actually went to school at the university with and that kind of thing. I'm not afraid to call and ask for help. Same thing in Reading Rainbow District. Their assistant super is a female, and I'll call her in a heartbeat. I don't mind doing that. One of the things that's helped me is Dr. Superintendent allows me to participate in a lot of the professional learning that we're sending our principals, and our instructional coaches, and our assistant principals out to do, particularly we're really involved in the Best Practice Center networks.

When asked whether mentoring was needed to sustain her position, Vanessa shared mentoring needed to sustain her position consists of mentoring that is trustworthy. She stated, "Mentoring, just people that I can trust. People that will be on my team whether I'm right or wrong." She revealed informal mentoring is needed to sustain her position, and she currently mentors others. Vanessa explained:

As far as just the informal mentoring no formal mentoring, but believe it or not, I serve as a mentor not in just this district for new HR people. For some reason they cling to me. I think that's good and bad sometimes. Serving as a mentor, too, I'm going to be honest with you, helps me stay on my toes because I feel like I'm responsible for someone else's well-being, and someone else's growth, so it keeps me on my toes. It lets me know that I can't slip because if I slip, I'm actually hurting someone else as well.

Jasmine shared the mentoring needed to sustain her position occurs at a meeting for coordinators. She stated, “I’ve been to novice coordinators’ meetings.”

**Veteran female assistant superintendents’ facilitating factors sustaining their position.** Five themes emerged from the veteran female assistant superintendents’ responses to the interview questions regarding facilitating factors they described in sustaining their position which is displayed in Table 10. The results revealed that facilitating factors were associated with veteran female assistant superintendents in sustaining their position. The veteran female assistant superintendents had acquired skills, maintained positive relationships, were involved in networking, and were committed to mentoring others and felt fulfilled through their work. The themes have quotes supplied from participants that provide thick, rich description to support the themes.

*Acquired skills.* The veteran female assistant superintendents believed possessing effective communication abilities helped sustain their positions as assistant superintendents. All veteran assistant superintendents shared they had acquired the skill of listening. Pearl shared, “To be a good listener. You’ve got to listen to people and do more listening than you do talking. You can’t make judgments quickly.” Pearl added the ability to listen has helped her become more knowledgeable about decisions stating:

Decision making, recommendations, of course, the superintendent makes the decisions, but a great number of times we meet every week at least once, so do we have the knowledge or the know of what’s going to happen ahead of time? Yes. That’s why you learn to be very quiet and listen a great deal, and not talk a lot.

Furthermore, the ability to listen has helped Pearl sustain positive relationships. Pearl explains:

Collegial relationships with the staff and the principals, they have to trust you. They have to know that you're listening to them. They have to know that what they say is of value. They have to know that you care enough to listen. I think the relationships that are pertinent, and the relationships you have to have a collaborative relationship with both the principals and the central office and the superintendent. You cannot work in isolation or think your way is the only way. You've got to be willing to listen to everyone and realize that collaboration, and it may not be their way is going to work or your way is going to work. It's probably somewhere in the middle. You've got to listen to others.

Like Pearl, Shirley shared a similar experience with the importance of being a good listener when working in middle management. When she remembered her feelings working between the superintendent and principals, Shirley stated, "In their venting, if they have a valid argument, I'm taking that in. I'm listening to them, and I'm talking to him about it. I just consider that part of what we do." Shirley further explained the importance of communication stating, "Being able to communicate to a variety of groups. Learning how to really consider when communicating with people, really consider your audience whether you're speaking or it's just a one on one meeting."

Similar to Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie also shared her experience with possessing listening abilities. Kerrie stated: "Well, I have learned to become a very good listener and to process before speaking. I have learned to use my words very tactfully, very strategically, very intentional." When meeting with principals, Kerrie added:

You train yourself on how to communicate, how to talk to people, articulate things in the way you want them communicated, choosing the right words, conducting yourself in a business matter, and also in an empathetic manner. You are genuinely listening instead of just sitting across the big desk and exhibiting the power. They know you're going to make a decision. I do a lot of listening from principals standpoint not necessarily making their decisions for them but again going back to that coaching and guiding, instead of really supervising.

She added, "I go back to listening. I don't mean the good old eye contact. I mean genuine listening, processing, understanding what the person is trying to communicate to you and then finding the best response I can to give them back to give them guidance." Kerrie further stated she wanted people to know that she listens to them proclaiming:

I want people to know I care. I want people to know I'll listen. I need to be able to listen to the cafeteria worker relate to bus driver. I need to be able to relate to the maintenance supervisor. I need to be able to relate to parents. People are looking at you to solve the problem. Help them; listen to them. They are looking for you to guide them, to tell them what to do, tell them what are we going to do about this.

Kerrie further emphasized that she listens to her superintendent. She stated, "I may have chosen to do it different but for the most part, I go back to that collaboration, that view of opinion, time spent listening and discussing."

In addition to listening, planning is another acquired skill. Both Shirley and Kerrie cited planning as a very important skill to sustaining the superintendency. When

asked how does she balance the assistant superintendent role, Shirley stated, “Planning is big.” When asked about skills that helped you sustain this position, Shirley stated, “Planning is huge. That is a skill you have to learn. If you’re going to be successful at this level, that’s with funding; that’s with a calendar; that’s with resources; and with personnel, planning is key.”

Besides listening and planning, delegating is also a skill needed to sustain the assistant superintendency. Both Shirley and Kerrie referenced the act of delegating as a skill needed to sustain their positions. Shirley stated, “I’ve learned how to delegate some things a little more. I delegate, I seek out people to help me, whatever I need to do to ensure that the job is done if I’m feeling pressured or stressed.” Similarly, Kerrie stated, “With the demands growing, we had to start to really delegate.”

Lastly, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie explained that a skill needed to sustain their position is they possessed the skill of being trustworthy. They explained the importance of people being able to feel they can trust you and you feeling as though you can trust others.

Pearl stated she has a trusting relationship with her principals explaining:

You don't try to run their schools, you let them run their schools. You have to trust your people enough to know this is what you need to make this decision. Sometimes with your newer principals, which I have two brand new principals, you have to say, ‘If in doubt, call me.’ Don't feel bad, you have to be available, but I think approaching decision making at its lowest level, and you have to trust people to do it. Collegial relationships with the staff and the principals, they have to trust you.

Also, the superintendent trusted Pearl to make decisions. When discussing how the superintendent feels about her making decisions, Pearl stated, “A lot of times he'll just say, ‘You got to do what you got to do, so do what you think is right.’” Furthermore, others trust Pearl. Pearl exclaims, “It is lonely in that you can't share everything, but you have to have a relationship where people are willing to talk to you, willing to share with you information, have a level of trust that what they are going to say will be held in confidence.”

Shirley stated she has a trusting relationship with her peers and colleagues explaining: “Trust is important, what I'm getting after, and you have to build that with peers and colleagues.” Also, the superintendent trusts Shirley to make decisions. Shirley expressed:

I'm able to make my own decisions. I'm able to make a lot of financial decisions, within my budget, within my programs, my Title I, Title II, Title VI, those kinds of things. He pretty much gives me the freedom to do that. His leadership style, he's not a micro-manager. He trusts my decision making. The superintendent is answerable to the board of education and until the board knew me and trusted my decisions, I think that would be something that would concern me just until they got to know me and trust my decision making. I think as a show of trust in his senior administrators, we have a lot of say so. He really respects our opinions, he asks for them.

Additionally, Kerrie stated trust plays a key role in her relationship with her administrators. When working with administrators to make decisions, Shirley stated,

“They have to trust that answer. And, if they know your decisions have been made on fairness and on trust, then they will trust that basic answer you give them.”

***Maintained positive relationships.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie cited maintaining positive relationships as a factor in sustaining their position. Realizing the importance of relationships, they all identified pertinent relationships that have enabled them to be able to sustain their positions. When asked what relationships have helped her sustain her position, Pearl responded,

Collegial relationships with the staff and the principals, they have to trust you. They have to know that you're listening to them. They have to know that what they say is of value. They have to know that you care enough to listen. I think a collegial relationship with central office and with the principals.

When asked what relationships are pertinent to your success as assistant superintendent, Pearl responded:

I think the relationships that are pertinent and the relationships you have to have, a collaborative relationship with both the principals and the central office and the superintendent. You cannot work in isolation or think your way is the only way. You've got to be willing to listen to everyone and realize that collaboration, and it may not be their way is going to work or your way is going to work. It's probably somewhere in the middle. You've got to listen to others.

When asked what relationships have helped sustain her position, Shirley responded, “You have to have good working relationships with all levels of administration, teachers,



students, community members. They're all important.” When Kerrie was asked what relationships help sustain her in this position, Kerrie answered:

My administrative staff, my immediate office, personnel in my office, my superintendent, respective instructional staff, really the entire staff, I believe that no matter what capacity you're in, if I'm the assistant superintendent, I need to be able to listen to the cafeteria worker, relate to bus driver I need to be able to relate to the maintenance supervisor. I need to be able to relate to parents. I need them to know that I am aware of what is going on in this district, and I want them to know that I work hard. I want them to know that I absolutely do my best to be fair. I think fair is a big issue with people these days. They want to be treated fairly.

In addition to all realizing that relationships are needed to sustain their position as assistant superintendent, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all engaged in shared leadership relationships with their superintendents. When asked about collaborative decision making with the superintendent, Pearl stated the superintendent very rarely makes decisions on his own pointing out:

He is the ultimate one who takes the falls for everything. All the recommendations on hiring and firing as far as administrative staffs, but I would say 98 percent to 95 percent of those come through the cabinet. He's going to talk to us about them. He's very much a collaborative leader. I've been with another superintendent who was not. He did not go that way. He made the decisions point blank. This particular superintendent is very much a collaborative person.

Pearl even shared how collaborative the superintendent is as she disclosed:

Decision making in the district, the superintendent has a cabinet, and the cabinet makes most of the decisions and the recommendations to the superintendent. The cabinet is composed of the chief financial officer and the three deputies, and that's it. Decision making, recommendations, of course the superintendent makes the decisions, but a great number of times, we meet every week at least once, so do we have the knowledge or the know of what's going to happen ahead of time?

Yes.

When asked about collaborative decision making with the superintendent, Shirley stated, "He really embraces a shared decision making model. His leadership style, he's not a micro-manager." When asked about her shared leadership relationship with the superintendent, Kerrie explained, "It is very transparent." She describes how collaborative their relationship is stating:

I provide my opinions and my thoughts on it. Yes, we will have a discussion.

Then, I will look at the end of the conversation and know it's his final decision to make suspension of personnel, or disciplinary actions, or you know the dismissals of schools. Those things that impact the whole district unless he ordered me to do it, then he would make it, but again it would be a simple conversation, 'Hey, what do you think about this; I think we're going to do this. You let the principals know we're going to have early dismissal.'

In addition to maintaining the positive relationships and engaging in shared leadership with their superintendents, both Pearl and Shirley stated their superintendents were also teachers who would explain the rationale behind changing a decision they had made.

Pearl stated although her superintendent is a leader, he's constantly teaching. She explained:

He's usually very good at saying 'Why, let's talk about why I want to go another way'. Sometimes I'll say, 'You know I just don't see that,' and he'll say, 'Do you feel strongly about it?' 'Yeah.' 'Okay, we won't go that way.' But if I say, 'I see your side, okay, I understand.' He's very caring, and very much a people person.

When Shirley reminisced about decisions that had to be overturned, she explained it resulted in a teaching moment stating:

It made me feel that, and it was a discipline decision, but it made me feel that I should've been more. It was a learning experience. I didn't feel bad or upset with him about it because the other thing is he never turns you down, tells you no about something without an explanation. While I might not like the answer, I can respect the answer because I understand where it's coming from. It makes you more thoughtful, again teaches you to anticipate, 'Oh, I didn't think of that; maybe I should've thought of that.' It's okay to be, it's not a bad thing to have your superintendent say, 'Hey why don't we do it this way.' It's a learning experience.

***Involved in networking.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie cited their involvement in networking as a facilitating factor to sustaining their role as assistant superintendent. They all agreed that building networks is important to sustaining their position. Pearl, Shirley, and Jasmine all state they are involved in networking. When asked whether building networks is important to sustaining her position as assistant superintendent, Pearl responded,

It's critical. If you don't build relationships and networks, you can't survive. You cannot survive in isolation. It is lonely in that you can't share everything, but you have to have a relationship where people are willing to talk to you, willing to share with you information, have a level of trust that what they are going to say will be held in confidence, will make a difference, so it's important that you have that feeling of collaboration.

When further explaining the value of this networking, Pearl explains:

There are several statewide organizations that I've been a part of where there are male and female leaders that we have worked together on different topics, meaning I've been on several state committees where we've worked on different areas. That relationship has formed a network where you learn people in different genders and different areas that do the same job. That relationship has been valuable, but it's been committees I've been on, professional organizations I've been a part of that have helped.

When asked whether building networks is important to sustaining her position as assistant superintendent, Shirley replied:

Mmm-hmm [affirmative], talking to these people who do this as well, or similar jobs as you, maybe they've already developed ways to meet some of their requirements. For federal programs, there are tons of requirements from the state. Maybe they've already developed or have easier ways to keep up with things or to document whatever it is we have to document. Just from an efficiency standpoint you want to talk to people about what they're doing and how they're doing it.

In regards to networking relationships needed to sustain her position, Shirley added:

Once I got into this position and started attending meetings where other curriculum directors and federal programs coordinators were attending, I sought out people that were in similar positions and made contact with those people and built up those networks along the way as I met people. Performing the same tasks, could be state department people, could be anybody that had any knowledge that I can use, I find out who they are what they do and exchange phone numbers and network that way.

When asked whether building networks is important to sustaining her position as assistant superintendent, Kerrie commanded, “Continue to value those networks that you have continued to fall back on.” Kerrie continued discussing the importance of networking:

I still stay in contact with people who were in my classes. I still stay in contact with people I made relationships with at the academy, maintain relationships with new people that I have learned from. If your phone never rings and nobody calls you to ask you a question, undoubtedly, you’re not bringing much to the table. I will help someone find the answer they need, or I’ll share a situation, and then somebody give me advice to use to make my program better.

Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all stated they network with peers and colleagues.

When asked whether she networks with peers and colleagues, Pearl responded, “Yes.”

When asked whether she networks with peers and colleagues, Shirley responded, “I do. I do. Most of it's inside of school but occasionally outside of work.” When sharing

experiences, Kerrie shared that networking with peers and colleagues is important.

Kerrie added:

We network. We can't avoid it. We don't want to avoid it; you have to have the assurance on some decisions that you're making the right decisions and those are big decisions, not the day to day decisions. When we're making district decisions, you want to get input. You don't want to isolate a group, or you don't want to isolate a certain group of people because it could impact them somehow so we network a lot. We network in informal places, maybe at a ballgame. Then, we'll have principals' meeting where we'll have a formal agenda, and we're working through it.

Being a part of organizations has also enabled opportunities for networking.

Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie cited organizations of which they are members that provides opportunities for networking. When discussing the importance of networking in professional organizations, Pearl disclosed:

I think a lot of your online professional magazines, ASCD and Phi Delta Kappan, and some of those professional organizations give you current trends, current things that are happening. You have to go to professional activities to stay attuned, otherwise you get flat lined, and you keep doing things the way you've always done it. You have to know that there are things, the world is changing. Today's world is not the world it was five years ago.

She further added, "Probably the organizations that I've been a part of are the AAAA, which is the state organization. I've been nationally a member of ASCD and Phi Delta

Kappan and actually I stay a part of the NASSP, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and AAAA.” When discussing the importance of networking in professional organizations, Shirley revealed that networking in professional organizations has helped sustain her role as assistant superintendent sharing, “I am a member of NAFEPA, which is the National Association of Federal Program Directors. I’m also a member of the state delegation of that. As well as ASCD, that’s the supervision and curriculum organization at the state level middle class. What else? AAAA, I’m a member of AAAA which is for instructional leaders.” Like Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie also participated in professional organizations that have helped sustain her role as assistant superintendent citing, “I’m a member of AAAA, NAFEPA. I participate in a lot of professional development.”

***Committed to mentoring others.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all stated they are committed to mentoring others. When asked whether she participates in any mentoring needed to sustain her position, Pearl responded, “Not sure there’s any mentoring needed.” When asked to explain her response, she stated, “I guess because I’m saying that I am looking at retiring in the next couple years, so I don’t see that as changing a great deal within the next year or two.” However, she did state that she provides supports to principals. Pearl stated, “I am the direct supervisor of 26 principals, so I evaluate those principals. As far as training or providing assistance, when they do need help or assistance, that group of principals or even the other group, will call and we are the direct source of information or assistance for those groups of principals.” She further stated, “We also attend professional development training and go to both state and national

training meetings to provide assistance to principals.” When asked whether mentoring was needed to sustain her position, Shirley stated:

If I were new to this position, I might say yes. Given that this is year eleven at this point, and I'm not saying I know it all, but I'm saying if I was having a mentor assist me on this job, no I don't think that that would be beneficial.

As a matter of fact, Shirley mentored others. She stated:

I informally mentor, like I said we've had some turnover in administration, and I informally mentor them. I'm actually the liaison for the state mentoring program so I mentor teachers. We do a series of new teacher training meetings about four of them a year that I count as mentoring because I can get in with new teachers and share with them not only about instruction, but if they're new teachers some of the pitfalls and things to look for, just some common sense kind of things. I think that helps. Mentoring is a part of my job.

When asked whether she participates in any mentoring needed to sustain her position, Kerrie responded she's very confident now stating, “As I evolved in assistant superintendent, I was very confident. I had those years of training under my belt.” In fact, she now mentors others. Kerrie shared now she mentors others stating:

I do mentor some new people to the profession. I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis. I think it's a very informal way of work plus mentoring, but I do feel like I mentor them. When someone replies, ‘Oh yeah, I understand that now. That's a good idea. I need to do it that way, or I wouldn't have thought about doing it that way. I like the way you use those words.’ I feel



like if I can provide that, then I am providing mentoring on a daily basis and letting them process the difference in the way they thought it should be and the way we ended up- the way it was going to be.

***Fulfilled through work.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie stated they had decided to remain so long as assistant superintendents because they were fulfilled through work. When asked why you have stayed so long as assistant superintendent, Pearl replied, “I guess I enjoy the position. I enjoy working with the principals. Every day is a little different. As soon as you think you've seen everything, something new will happen. Something brand new happened yesterday. The challenge, the opportunities, it is not the same any one day. Shirley was asked the same question and provided a similar response. Shirley explained:

Number one, I really enjoy my job. I think that I do it well. I think I'm making some really positive impacts in the entire school district. That's on the professional side. It's satisfying. On the personal side of things, I'm not free to relocate. I don't have an interest in doing that. I'm homesteaded here. When I think about family, this works for me at this stage of my life. I've not pursued any other opportunities. I've had opportunities. I've had people call me and express interest in applying for the positions, but I've never taken them up on them including the superintendency. This is where I believe I need to be right now, and where God has me.

Like Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie provided the same response stating:

I'm very invested in our district. I enjoy what I do. I have a lot of respect for our students and our staff. I want to work as hard as they do. I want to make a difference. I'm challenged with the newness of every year. We've taken on six new administrators this year, and I feel like it's my job to prepare them, to be by their side, to help them grow, and in turn that helps our community. I feel like I bring something to the table to help them grow as an administrator, in turn help their staff grow as well as their students. I like to be the best, and I feel like I have work to do. I want to do better every day.

Table 9

*Novice Female Assistant Superintendents' Facilitating Factors Sustaining Their Position*

Theme	Tessie	Vanessa	Jasmine
Acquired Skills	"You'd better be a multi-tasker. You've got to be able to multitask."	"I listen to what everybody has to say that's involved in the situation, and then I use discernment to make the best decision for whatever that particular situation."	"Being able to prioritize and maintain timelines and due dates is huge."
Maintained Positive Relationships	"The most important relationship is my relationship with the superintendent himself. That's got to be solid. Probably right behind that is my relationship with principals and clerical staff is really, really important."	"Every relationship that I can make helps me in this role."	"The relationships with the parents and teachers are paramount."
Involved in Networking	"I network with other AP leaders in the whole United States. I learned so much from that, because I got ideas on how we could make our program more successful, how I could challenge my teachers, how I could support my teachers with professional learning."	"But who may have great practices, so the networking, and the collaboration amongst people in similar roles is something that I have to depend on."	"I really think the networking is important. Networking even within our school system. Keeping those ties and staying on top of problems before they become bigger problems."
Valued Mentoring	You got to have it, in my opinion, whether it's informal or formal. I don't know everything. I just think that if you don't have some folks that you can depend on to give you honest opinions, to reel you in when you're off-course, I think it would be hard to succeed at this."	When asked what mentoring is needed to sustain her position, Vanessa answered, "Just people that I can trust. People that will be on my team whether I'm right or wrong."	When asked what mentoring was needed to sustain her position, Jasmine responded participation in the coordinators' meeting stating, "I've been to novice coordinators' meetings."

Table 10

*Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents' Facilitating Factors Sustaining Their Position*

Theme	Pearl	Shirley	Kerrie
Acquired Skills	“You don't try to run their schools, you let them run their schools. You have to trust your people enough to know this is what you need to make this decision.”	“Planning is huge. That is a skill you have to learn. If you're going to be successful at this level, that's with funding; that's with a calendar; that's with resources; and with personnel, planning is key.”	“With the demands growing, we had to start to really delegate.”
Maintained Positive Relationships	“Collegial relationships with the staff and the principals... you have to have a collaborative relationship with both the principals and the central office and the superintendent.”	“You have to have good working relationships with all levels of administration, teachers, students, community members. They're all important.”	“My administrative staff, my immediate office, personnel in my office, my superintendent respective instructional staff really the entire staff [are pertinent relationships].”
Involved in Networking	“That relationship has formed a network where you learn people in different genders and different areas that do the same job. That relationship has been valuable.”	“Anybody that had any knowledge that I can use, I find out who they are what they do and exchange phone numbers and network that way.”	“We network we can't avoid it we don't want to avoid it you have to have the assurance on some decisions that you're making the right decisions....”
Committed to mentoring others	“I am the direct supervisor of 26 principals, so I evaluate those principals. As far as training or providing assistance, when they do need help or assistance, that group of principals or even the other group, will call and we are the direct source of information or assistance for those groups of principals.”	“I informally mentor, like I said we've had some turnover in administration, and I informally mentor them.”	“I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis. I think it's a very informal way of work plus mentoring, but I do feel like I mentor them.”
Fulfilled through Work	“I guess I enjoy the position. I enjoy working with the principals. Every day is a little different. The challenge, the opportunities, it is not the same any one day.”	“I really enjoy my job. I think that I do it well. I think I'm making some really positive impacts in the entire school district.”	“I enjoy what I do I have a lot of respect for our students and our staff I want to work as hard as they do I want to make a difference I'm challenged with the newness of every year.”

### **Analysis of female assistant superintendent experiences as middle space leaders**

Seven themes emerged from the female assistant superintendents' responses to the interview questions in which female assistant superintendents described their experiences as middle space leaders. Research question three was the following: How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space? Their experiences align with the characteristics of middle space leadership. A total of seven themes emerged after the transcript data was analyzed. The seven themes were composed of location, function, tasks, roles, relationships, passages, and challenges. The findings are presented for the two cases in the following order: novice female assistant superintendents and veteran female assistant superintendents.

#### **Novice female assistant superintendents' experiences as middle space leaders.**

Seven themes emerged from thoroughly analyzing the novice female assistant superintendents' responses to the interview questions that required the novice female assistant superintendents to describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space which are displayed in Table 11. The results revealed that all three novice female assistant superintendents described their experiences by describing their location, function, tasks, roles, relationships, passages, and challenges.

*Location.* All three novice female assistant superintendents divulged that they work in an area that is below the superintendent. Thus, they act as middle managers because they work in an area between upper management and lower management. When asked where your position falls in the organizational chart, Tessie responded:

A superintendent, well, of course our Board of Education would be at the top of the chart as our governing body then below our Board of Education is our superintendent. Then, I would fall directly below our superintendent, and then below me would be all of our supervisors and our principals.

When asked if there were times when she worked between upper management and lower level workers, Tessie responded, "I think that example I gave this morning of the principal calling me, 'What do you think?' I mean, he could have called the superintendent, but he called me first, and then I just kind of bridged that off and went and talked to the superintendent. I'm actually the one that called him back and said, 'Okay, here's what we're thinking.'"

When asked where her position falls on the organizational chart, Vanessa responded:

I'm right below the superintendent, and I'll provide you a copy of that. The superintendent, of course, answers to the board, and I answer to the superintendent. In our district there are only two assistant superintendents in the district, one over operations, and one over human resources then the other things like executive directors, and things that fall below us.

When asked if there are times when she worked between upper management and lower level workers, Vanessa responded:

Making decisions and some were certified some were classified, those kinds of situations are the time when you see us having to unify and bring people together.

When there are serious issues in the district, I am usually one of the people she selects to go with her to do those kind of things.

When asked where her position falls in the organizational chart, Jasmine responded, “Our superintendent would be our primary leader and then we have another assistant superintendent who oversees different departments so he and I are together.” When asked if there are times when she worked between upper management and lower level workers, Jasmine responded, “Yeah, it goes both ways. The superintendent has something the principals may not love the idea of. You're the ear and then the coercer in getting them to get on board with it.”

**Function.** All three novice female assistant superintendents functioned both as managers and system integrators. Responsible for specific areas, they functioned as managers. They also functioned as system integrators as they worked with their peers and colleagues to keep things in perspective and maintain balance within the organization between upper management and lower level workers.

Sharing her experiences as a manager, Tessie revealed she managed curriculum and instruction. Tessie stated:

My primary responsibilities are in curriculum and instruction. Most of my work is done in the areas of curriculum and instruction. Of course, within that, I am responsible for testing and all the other things that build resources to make good decisions where curriculum and instruction are concerned.

As a system integrator, Tessie also shared experiences whereas she works with peers and colleagues to keep things balanced between upper management and lower level workers.

Describing her experiences functioning as a system integrator, Tessie explained how as assistant superintendent, she integrates and networks between the superintendent and principals to keep things balanced between the two entities. Tessie discussed being the balance between the superintendent and principals as she reminisces about a time when the principal called her with a question. Providing details, Tessie stated, “This morning, when that principal called and asked a question, I said, "You know, I have an answer for you in mind, but this is one, I want to talk to Dr. Superintendent about and get his opinion.”

Sharing her experiences as a manager, Vanessa revealed she managed the human resources department. Vanessa stated, “I am the assistant superintendent for human resources which means that I deal with, of course, the hiring, the recommendations for termination, discipline of classified and certified employees.” As a system integrator, Vanessa also shared experiences whereas she works with peers and colleagues to keep things balanced between upper management and lower level workers. Describing her experiences functioning as a system integrator, Vanessa explained how as assistant superintendent, she integrates and networks between the superintendent and principals to keep things balanced between the two entities. Vanessa discussed being the balance between the superintendent and principals as she mentioned she is the one the principals call to hire staff. Vanessa recalled:

Principals make recommendations to me, and I pretty much yea or nay it, and then those that go to the board for final approval, of course, but those are usually mine. The way this department is handled and run, the innovations those are mine to make. I just have to make sure I have the funding, and she [superintendent] has to

approve that part of it. Those kinds of things are strictly just mine. The recommendations and the decisions I make for principals are usually just mine. I know what the vision is for the district. She trusts that I'm going to stay within that vision, and she just lets me go for it.

Also, Vanessa stated she is an asset to the superintendent as she is relied on to stay connected with the staff and help balance out the superintendent's responsibilities stating, "She's the superintendent with many roles and has to wear all of these different hats. There's no way she can connect with all of the people in the way that I have to connect with them." Vanessa added that she helps keeps things balanced between the superintendent and schools in regards to schedules stating, "I can schedule anything, student schedules, whatever the case may be, so those decisions are strictly ours because she expects us to make sure everything works." Vanessa attributes trust as to why the principals call on her, thus helping to keep things in perspective between the superintendent and the principals. She recalled what she thinks principals say about her stating, "'She [Vanessa] may not always say what we want to hear, but we know she's going to stand by what she says, and it's going to be fair.' I think that's all that I can ask." Helping keep things balanced, Vanessa further described herself as a problem solver for principals. She stated:

I'm also a problem solver for them. When they get in a situation, or if they have something happen at their school...it's easy for me to come out, and shadow a principal to give him some tips to see a teacher, to see if this person is effective, or if we need to consider some other things for that person, so really whatever it is that they need even when it comes down to just looking at their schedules.



Sharing her experiences as a manager, Jasmine revealed she managed special education and federal programs. Jasmine stated, “I am the special education coordinator and the federal programs director and then we also work and assist with local indicators, dyslexia, anything else the superintendent deems necessary.” As a system integrator, Jasmine also shared experiences whereas she works with peers and colleagues to keep things balanced between upper management and lower level workers. Describing her experiences functioning as a system integrator, Jasmine explained how as assistant superintendent, she integrates and networks between the superintendent and principals to keep things balanced between the two entities. Jasmine discussed being the balance between the superintendent and principals as she mentioned she is the one who helps sell the superintendent’s mandates to the principals. Jasmine recalled, “The superintendent has something the principals may not love the idea of. You're the ear and then the coercer in getting them to get on board with it.” Adding further clarity about keeping things in perspective between the superintendent and principals, Jasmine added, “We were just saying about the principals, you listen. They vent. They complain and then we reach a, hopefully, positive conclusion.”

**Tasks.** All three novice assistant superintendents shared their experiences of acting as a subordinate by taking orders, a superior by giving orders, an equal by being a peer or colleague, and a delegator and doer by both assigning and completing tasks. Tessie shared her experiences functioning as the superintendent’s subordinate by taking orders from her superintendent. Tessie also clarified that the CSFO would not give her orders as this would be more of providing her with factual information. Tessie explained:

Yes, if the superintendent gives them, pretty much. He's the only one that really, or our CSFO because she actually works for the board. She's not considered a part of our hierarchy. She's a separate entity to herself. I wouldn't even call them, from her, I mean, it wouldn't be orders. It would just be this is what we can and can't do money-wise. It's just facts a lot of times. This is what we have, and this is what we don't have.

Vanessa shared her experiences functioning as the superintendent's subordinate by taking orders from her superintendent. Vanessa explained:

Yes, I take orders every day. Mondays are usually when we get our marching orders from the superintendent, anything that she feels other than our daily things that we have to do, things that she would like for us to work on, problems that she would like for us to solve, those kinds of things. She gives us those marching orders, and we make sure that we take care of whatever it is that she needs to take care of.

When reminiscing about beginning to sign her emails using her Assistant Superintendent title, Vanessa revealed, "I just recently started signing my emails Vanessa, Assistant Superintendent, because I was told I needed to do that. I usually sign it as Vanessa. I mean you know who I am. Why do you need all of that?" When the researcher asked whether that was an order from the superintendent, Vanessa responded:

It was. She just said, 'You know, Vanessa, I know you're just Vanessa, and you always say that, but send out your communications with that [Assistant Superintendent] on it. Sometimes you need to have that [Assistant

Superintendent] on it.' If I'm talking to someone outside of the agency, I always sign it that way, but a lot of my documents, and even my emails become legal documents. I think that was the rationale for that. They always put it up on some screen in some courtroom.

Jasmine shared that she functions as the superintendent's subordinate by taking orders from her superintendent. Jasmine shared the experience of her following her superintendent's orders to attend a meeting. In the end, Jasmine understood why her superintendent sent her to attend the meeting. Jasmine explained:

Yes, at the very beginning, I said anything else the superintendent deems necessary. When she tells us to do something, we do it. For example, I got an email I was going to a meeting last week and I was like, 'Okay I'll be there,' for our career set building, and at the time, I questioned it. When I got there and listened, it was very educational. There was a reason she wanted people there.

In addition to sharing their experiences functioning as a subordinate, Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine also shared experiences about functioning as superiors by giving orders. Tessie shared her experiences functioning as a superior by giving orders in the form of making the final decisions and telling people what to do. Preferably and when she can, Tessie likes to consider other's opinions before simply giving orders and is proud that she is a collaborative leader. However, there are times when she simply gives orders and tells people what to do. Tessie explained:

Yeah, sometimes I just have to make final decisions. This is what I've learned as a leader. People want to collaborate and give input, but they do reach a point where

they just want you to say, 'Make a decision. Make a decision, tell me what you want me to do.' I don't want to feel handcuffed and stymied. I want to be able to move forward. That's a skill you have to learn, too, is when it's that time. We've talked about this. We've beat this horse. Now, where are we going? There are times when they're just ready for me to say, 'Okay, Tessie, what do you want? What do you want us to do?' Yes, but I pride myself on listening to them first unless it's a student safety issue like I said. I mean, there's times when you don't have time to gather input. You've got to make a decision because you've got a kid that's depending on you. Other times, I pride myself on listening to them, but there does come a time when they're ready for you to stop the collaborating, and let's make a decision, and let's move forward.

Vanessa shared her experiences functioning as a superior by giving orders. She described her experience giving orders to her directors to ensure the superintendent's wishes are accomplished. When asked whether she gives orders, Vanessa answered:

Yes, every day, I have three directors. One classified and two certified directors make up my board, but they have a to-do list. I give them their marching orders usually every other day. We are all in the same space, so we work very closely together, but I have to make sure that whatever the superintendent has given to me that we all understand what the big picture is, so they're given their marching orders, and they're also given certain things non-negotiables, so to speak, things that they have to take care of.

Jasmine shared her experiences functioning as a superior by giving orders stating she gives orders when things must get done. Jasmine explained, “Yes, when things are due and deadlines are needed or budgets are needed or plans have to be completed, those orders, per se, have to go out.”

Not only do the novice female assistant superintendents function as subordinates and superiors by taking and giving orders, but they also function as equals by acting as peers or colleagues. Tessie described her experience functioning both as a colleague and peer. Tessie explained that she hopes that she is considered both a colleague and peer and can easily transition to a more serious side. Tessie shared:

Honestly, I really think I'm always seen as that. I hope that's what my principals would tell you. I strive to be that. I have never, in 11 years, thought of myself as a boss. I really don't even like that word. I see myself as a piece of this puzzle, just a small piece of this puzzle. Now, my responsibilities are different than the other people that are a part of the puzzle, but I see myself as their colleague and their peer.

Vanessa described her experience functioning as more of a colleague instead of a peer. Vanessa explained she hopes her directors view her more as a colleague and she has no problem with people understanding her title. In fact, she believes leaders should not have to advertise they are leaders. Instead, it should be understood by the leader's actions.

Vanessa explained:

Even with the directors here, I think they see me more as their colleague. They know if I ever pull rank, they get tickled by that. When they see me pull rank with

anyone in the district, they know that it's because it's needed. I feel like we all work together. My title only tells payroll how to pay me. That's what I use that title for.

Jasmine described her experience functioning as both a colleague and peer. Describing her experience and sharing whether she is considered a peer or colleague, she begins wondering about whether the age difference has led to some of her staff members considering her in a motherly role rather than as a peer or colleague but then revealed how she is considered a peer or colleague until decisions have to be made. Jasmine shared:

Sometimes I wonder about that with our case managers with my age and theirs. I was about to say when they're older, but that's not necessarily true because I think sometimes the younger ones see that also. I feel like I'm their mom. I feel like I'm ancient compared to the them because they're so young, but yes, I can see that [acting as a peer or colleague].

She also shared how her staff members have become more prone to having conversations with her. When asked whether she thought her case managers considered her as a peer or colleague, Jasmine responded, “That’s right until decisions have to be made. I think there's more communication now than there used to be. I may be totally wrong. My perception is that they feel more open to talking.”

In addition to functioning as subordinates by taking orders, superiors by giving orders, and equals by acting as peers or colleagues, female assistant superintendents also function as delegators and doers. In describing her experience acting as both a delegator

and doer, Tessie proclaimed she indeed performs this task proclaiming she does both but sometimes, it is up to her to do. Tessie stated:

I believe in delegation so I assign tasks a whole lot. I trust my people to do what they're good at. Then, there's times when I need to do it simply because I may have the knowledge to do it that they don't have access to, like with testing a lot of times. Sometimes it's just up to me. I just have to do it.

Similarly, Vanessa acts as both a delegator and doer. Vanessa felt that it is important for her to not only assign tasks but also be able to complete those same tasks. Describing her experiences acting as a delegator and doer, Vanessa explained:

I have three directors, and I also have one benefits coordinator. I have to assign them various tasks. The benefits coordinator, there's one for this district, and he deals with all the benefits. He serves directly under me. Of course, I assign all of those tasks to him. I stay abreast of what's going on, and I make sure that if he's out I can do his job. I think that's one of my roles as the assistant superintendent. If anybody is absent, I should be able to pick up that slack. I should be able to do everybody's job in here, and I actually do on a regular basis. Sometimes, I'll send all the secretaries at once to lunch in human resources, and I make sure I can do each one of their jobs. 'Y'all go have lunch,' and sometimes it's lunch on me. It just keeps me knowledgeable, it does, but everybody is assigned tasks. I assign tasks. One other thing that I'm responsible for, we deal with on-the-job injuries in this department. That is a task that I have assigned to an individual, but I know

how to do the on-the-job injuries, but that task is hers. I follow-up. I look over it, but as far as it being my primary responsibility it is not. I just have to oversee it.

Like Tessie and Vanessa, Jasmine shared similar experiences acting as both a delegator and doer. Sharing experiences about the school improvement plans, Jasmine stated, “CIP, for example, yes, I'm part of that, but the schools are doing the bulk of the work. I attend meetings. I proof it, etc. I'm the encourager. They're the worker, and yet we're all in it together.”

**Roles.** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine shared experiences that reflect three roles. All veteran female assistant superintendents shared experiences that show they act as a bridger, buffer, and boundary spanner. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared similar experiences acting as a bridger connecting upper management with lower level workers. The novice assistant superintendents also shared their experiences acting as a buffer serving as a protector of the organization, preventing uproars in the organization. Additionally, Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine shared their experiences acting as a boundary spanner searching for information and data to improve the organization

Tessie shared experiences revealing how she acts as a bridger as a middle space leader. Tessie described her experiences as stating that acting as a bridger connecting the superintendent with the principals is a necessity. She explained:

Yeah, I think that's definitely a yes. I think that example I gave this morning of the principal calling me, ‘What do you think?’ I mean, he could have called the superintendent, but he called me first, and then I just kind of bridged that off and went and talked to the superintendent.



Vanessa shared experiences revealing how she acts as a bridge as a middle space leader.

Vanessa remembered a time when she had to work to bridge staff together after discovering one of the directors had passed at the office stating:

Absolutely, I'll give you a really good example. We recently had one of our directors to pass in his office. It's one of the toughest days I've had. She [the superintendent] called me, and she said, 'I heard, somebody gave me a crazy call. Vanessa, where are you?' I said, 'About five minutes away from the office. What do you need me to do?' She [the superintendent] said, 'Someone said that this particular person didn't come home last night, and his car is at his office.' I said, 'Okay, I'm on my way. Maybe he worked, and fell asleep.' Well, that was not the case. When I got there, I found something very different, very tough day because it's somebody I did know personally and professionally. During that cycle, pulling people together because when people showed up in their office the next morning, she [the superintendent] and I were there on site making sure we did best for all workers, having meetings with them afterwards to make sure everybody was emotionally okay, making decisions, and some were certified, some were classified. When there are serious issues in the district, I am usually one of the people she [the superintendent] selects to go with her to do those kind of things.

Sharing her experiences as a bridge, Vanessa further shared how her psychology background has enabled her to help the superintendent bridge people together.

Describing how she has used her psychology degree to enable her to bridge the superintendent with lower level workers, Vanessa explained:

Like I said, the psychology background has been just remarkable in helping deal with people and pulling people together. We have so many controversial issues that usually end up in the newspaper, but I'm usually one of the ones that have to be on the scene to help pull people together to help her [the superintendent] pull people together. She's great at that, but sometimes when people, especially in lower levels see that we're unified, and we're a team, and there's not a power struggle there, it helps to bring people together. Almost sometimes, I feel like the campaign manager to keep it all together.

Jasmine shared experiences revealing how she acts as a bridger as a middle space leader. Describing her experiences helping the superintendent bridge her ideas to the lower level workers, Jasmine divulged:

Yes, when there's something that the superintendent is trying to get out, you're the positive spokesperson for that. For example, our high school may be going from blocks to periods, and we want that transition to go smoothly so when we're asked about it, we're discussing the pros of going to block because our superintendent feels strongly about that.

In regards to her role as a bridger, Jasmine added, “The superintendent has something, the principals may not love the idea of. You're the ear and then the coercer in getting them to get on board with it.”

In addition to acting as a bridger, Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared similar experiences in regards to acting as buffers serving as protectors and preventing uproars in

their organizations. Tessie shared experiences revealing how she acts as a buffer as a middle space leader, explaining

Social media has become the Achilles heel, I think, of all school districts, not just ours. It can be as simple as one of the things that I try to always do is in my personal social media, obviously in the school social media that I kind of manage, which is our Twitter account and that kind of thing, is always projecting a positive image of the school district. Then, I also can sometimes get a good feel for something that might be a bone of contention in the community, and then try to relay that to the right person who can either address that problem, or attack that problem, or whatever needs to be done. Sometimes, it's just communication, letting the person know who's involved.

Acting in a protective role, Vanessa shared her experiences acting as a buffer in regards to protecting the system explaining:

Yes, that is a big part of my job is first of all try to keep it out of the newspaper, and not to hide it, to calm it down, and to not just keep it calm. I have to settle it. I am one of the protectors of this district. I make sure that policies and procedures are followed exactly to protect us from any kind of claim. I think in any organization, you all should be protective of your organization, but that's more of my role, and to protect her [superintendent] from anything that she may not see, any potential claim, any potential situation that may harm kids, that may harm the district, that may harm her [the superintendent] personally.

Acting in a problem-solving role, Jasmine shared her experiences acting as a buffer in her organization. Sharing her experiences, Jasmine stated:

Sometimes things are said, true or not true; typically, not true in a negative way, and again you're that positive spokesperson for whatever the situation is. It's very similar to what we were just saying about the principals. You listen. They vent. They complain and then we reach a, hopefully, positive conclusion. It's the same way with the public, whether it's parents or simply the community members.

Besides acting as a bridger and buffer, Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared similar experiences in that they all act as a boundary spanner collecting information and data to help improve their organizations. Tessie shared experiences revealing her role as a boundary spanner as a middle space leader searching within and outside the organization for data to improve the organization. Tessie stated:

We are very much a data-driven system. As a matter of fact, I have spent the better part of my morning assembling data for our board retreat, which will be Thursday of this week, to share with our board members, very in-tune to where we are in terms of proficiency and also where we are in terms of rankings with other districts. We definitely look inside and outside. Our state testing is very important in terms of making good decisions as far as instruction and curriculum. We also are real in-tune to some things that we have inside. We use some progress monitoring tools inside the district that we have some pretty set windows of time that we want those administered, and then we analyze that data, both at the school level and at the district level then use that to determine next steps,

where do we go from here. Is this program, policy, structure that we've implemented succeeding or not. If it's not, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to adjust? Do we need to go a different direction all together? That is a very big part of what I do. That's definitely a huge part of my responsibilities.

Vanessa shared experiences revealing how she acts as a boundary spanner as a middle space leader. Vanessa shared:

We have to be data driven. It can't be my opinion, and what I think. Yes, I'm one of the data collectors for our cabinet. I provide all kinds of statistical data about the number of people we've non-renewed, the number of retirees we've had. Things that deal with turnover. That data provides a lot not only to our superintendent, but to our board, and to our principals at principal's meetings so they can kind of see what's going on in their staff, and maybe explain some of the trends that are happening in their buildings that actually deal with why maybe academically they're not succeeding because, of course, you have high teacher turnover that's going to affect academics and those kinds of things. I collect data through how many people are actually applying for different positions. I hate to say it; I'm just kind of a computer nerd. I feel like we're not the only people that can do things, and why reinvent the wheel, so I'm constantly looking across districts, and these are different states to see how they do things.

Jasmine shared experiences revealing how she acts as a boundary spanner as a middle space leader sharing she gets ideas from other systems quite frequently. Jasmine stated,

“Getting ideas as to what other systems do that we may be able to use or vary a little bit to work for our students, so yes. I do that a great deal.”

***Relationships.*** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared experiences about relationships with peers and colleagues, upper management, lower level workers, and mentors. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all maintained relationships with peers and colleagues.

When describing her experiences with relationships with peers and colleagues, Tessie shared she does not hesitate to maintain relationships with her peers and colleagues to share information. Describing her experiences, Tessie recalled, “There's still a lot of those people from those days that I wouldn't hesitate to pick up the phone and say, ‘Hey, what do you think about this?’” When describing her experience, Tessie recalled:

I do CCCC. I do the Visual State Best Practices Center Key Leaders Network then, I have teachers that do BBB. I also participate as a district liaison in HHH so there's a lot of networking there and a lot of focus on curriculum and instruction.

In regards to networking with peers and colleagues, Vanessa described her experiences declaring she relies on her relationships with peers and colleagues to share information.

Vanessa explained:

I'll always try to talk to people with districts just like ours because we have similar problems. I'm quick to call Success County or Strategic City, and sometimes Differentiation District. Then some of the smaller districts who may not have the problem, but who may have great practices, so the networking, and

the collaboration amongst people in similar roles is something that I have to depend on.

When describing her experiences with peers and colleagues, Jasmine responded she relies on these networks. Jasmine stated:

I really think the networking is important, networking even within our school system. Keeping those ties and staying on top of problems before they become bigger problems. Yes, when you do get to a point where you need a different viewpoint or you need some different experiences, having those numbers in your phone that you can call and discuss things with is wonderful.

When sharing their experiences about relationships with upper management, Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared the same experience of participating in shared leadership with their superintendents. When describing her experience with shared leadership with the superintendent, Tessie stated “Most of the time, he's [superintendent] going to say, ‘Let me see what Tessie thinks.’” Tessie added:

...we consult a lot about a lot of things. He asks my opinion on personnel issues. He asks my opinion on financial issues, but at the end of the day, those are his decisions, if that makes sense. Now, I may give my opinion or, ‘Okay, now I think you're on the right track,’ or, ‘Have you considered this?’ but at the end of the day, personnel, finances, those kinds of, he's going to make those decisions. He can always overrule my curriculum and instruction decisions, but he trusts me to make those decisions.

When describing her experience with shared leadership with her superintendent, Vanessa shared her experiences. Vanessa stated, “She's one as very collaborative in nature, but any of these she could decide.” When describing her experiences about shared leadership, Jasmine gloated, “I’m not sure, because we, thankfully, have a wonderful relationship to where she's supportive of whatever decisions.”

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all described their experiences about relationships with lower level workers. When describing her experiences with relationships with lower level workers, Tessie described the pertinent lower level relationships needed for her to sustain her role as a middle space leader. Tessie stated:

...my relationship with principals and understanding their realm and their needs in that position... I haven't mentioned this at all, but this is definitely a good spot. My clerical staff is really, really important. Making them feel valued and respected is super important because without their help, it would be very hard to succeed.

Continuing to describe her experiences sustaining her position in the middle space, Tessie discussed the importance of being able to support principals in her relationship with principals. Tessie explained her relationship with principals is one whereas she provides guidance and can engage in deep conversation. She explained:

This is probably one of my favorite parts of my job. I think I had an advantage in that I was their peer for quite some time for a lot of them, and we did have some turnover this year so we do have some new principals. Those that are new were actually APs in our district already so I already had some established relationships



when I started the job. As far as what I do, I supervise them. Both the superintendent and I do supervision, but my realm of supervision is more in curriculum and instruction. My conversations with them are really driven by curricular decisions, instructional decisions. My role in training them, any time there is anything related to curriculum and instruction, decisions related to curriculum and instruction, programming, changes we're making, initiatives that we're implementing, I do provide that training. Really as far as assistance is concerned, any kind of assistance that they need, I can and am willing to provide. Sometimes it's just a, 'What do you think about this? Is this a good idea?' or, 'What would you do in this situation?'

When describing her experiences regarding the relationships needed to sustain her position in the middle space, Vanessa considered every positive relationship a facilitating factor in sustaining her position. She expressed, "Every relationship that I can make helps me in this role." Vanessa also discussed the importance of being able to provide support to principals in her relationship with principals. Describing her experiences, Vanessa described her experiences with principals as one whereas there is a close relationship and one in which she provides support to the principals:

My relationship with the principals is a very close relationship. I think I have every one of their names and phone numbers in my phone because I'm their contact person if something goes right or wrong, and they need to tell me that. I know each one of them by name. I can tell you which one is at every school. They all know me very well. They call me on Saturdays and Sundays. As far as training them, yes, I'm responsible for making sure that they understand hiring practices,

training them on progressive discipline, anything that's either legal, or falls under the umbrella of human resources.

Jasmine disclosed that the most important relationships established for her to sustain her role as a middle space leader are with parents and teachers. Jasmine stated, “The relationships with the parents and teachers are paramount.” Jasmine described her relationship with principals as one which she also provides support to principals. Jasmine explained:

Yes, I work with all three principals a great deal with the special education side with their students. We provide training. I just had a principal’s meeting this morning actually with dyslexia. Our elementary school and middle school are Title I schools so I work with them a great deal on the federal side, our advisory meetings, parent meetings, budgets, etc.

In addition to describing sustaining their relationships with principals, they described their experiences being involved in a mentoring relationship to sustain their position as middle space leaders. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all described their experiences of being involved in a mentoring relationship. Describing her experience being mentored, Tessie stated:

You got to have it, in my opinion, whether it's informal or formal. If you put yourself in an island or on an island as a leader, you're going to have a hard time succeeding, because this is such a collaborative business that we're in. You can't always rely on your own knowledge. I don't know everything. I do not. I don't mind saying, ‘I have no clue.’ I said that to a counselor just this very morning. We

were talking about something related to testing. I'm a newbie, she's a newbie, and she asked me. I told her, 'I don't know, but I know people to call.' I don't mind asking questions. I just think that if you don't have some folks that you can depend on to give you honest opinions, to reel you in when you're off-course, I think it would be hard to succeed at this job.

Tessie added when discussing the mentoring needed to sustain her job:

I have to have opportunities to stay abreast of what's new and what's best practice. You have to. I cannot do this job if I don't know what the classroom should look like. As far as mentoring, I have a lot of informal mentoring relationships. Like I said, I'm very good friends with the assistant superintendents in Success School District and Powerful Learning School District I'm not afraid to call and ask for help. Same thing in Reading Rainbow District. Their assistant super is a female, and I'll call her in a heartbeat. I don't mind doing that.

When asked whether mentoring was needed to sustain her position, Vanessa shared mentoring needed to sustain her position consists of mentoring that is trustworthy. She stated, "Mentoring, just people that I can trust. People that will be on my team whether I'm right or wrong." She revealed informal mentoring is needed to sustain her position, and she currently mentors others. Vanessa explained:

As far as just the informal mentoring no formal mentoring, but believe it or not, I serve as a mentor not in just this district for new HR people. For some reason they cling to me. I think that's good and bad sometimes. Serving as a mentor, too, I'm going to be honest with you, helps me stay on my toes because I feel like I'm

responsible for someone else's well-being, and someone else's growth, so it keeps me on my toes. It lets me know that I can't slip because if I slip, I'm actually hurting someone else as well.

Jasmine shared the mentoring needed to sustain her position occurs attending meetings for coordinators. She stated, "I've been to novice coordinators' meetings."

**Passages.** When transitioning to assistant superintendent, female assistant Superintendents pass through a series of passages. Passages were entry-exit, immersion-emersion, disintegration-reintegration, and transformation-restabilization. During entry-exit, assistant superintendents prepare to transition into the new role of being in middle space while exiting out of their prior role. Entry-exit involves preparing to become assistant superintendent. Immersion-emersion describes assistant superintendents realizing the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space without having any prior training. Disintegration-reintegration describes finding new ways to act in the new role that will lead to succeeding in the middle space which involves acknowledging their middle power to lighten upper management's responsibilities. Transformation-restabilization describes the feelings of competence and confidence in successfully performing their job.

Tessie, Vanessa, and Kerrie all shared experiences in the entry-exit passage. Tessie, Vanessa, and Kerrie all shared that their education and experience prepared them for the assistant superintendency. Tessie described her experiences transitioning from principal into the role of assistant superintendent. Describing her entry-exit passage, Tessie summarized her transition to the assistant superintendency sharing that she was

fortunate to have the former assistant superintendent help her transitioning into the superintendency:

Yeah, this is probably the best thing that happened to me. The superintendent that preceded me, assistant superintendent that preceded me, she officially retired December 31st, but we hired her as a consultant for the second semester, which was very, very nice. They needed her. It wasn't so much intended for her replacement as it was to get us through the transition of hiring, because we knew we were going to be without someone from December until the search was complete and we had somebody in place. She agreed to stay on and work with me to help with the transition period, and that was huge.

Tessie also believed her education prepared her for the assistant superintendency. In fact, she stated that everyone who has held that position has held a doctorate with the exception of one person. Tessie stated:

As far as a specific degree, here, you pretty much need a doctorate to sit in this position, when you look at us traditionally. Now, we have had one example, well, since my reign here where the person either didn't have a doctorate or wasn't pursuing. We had one assistant superintendent that started with an Ed.S. but was pursuing the doctorate when she was chosen for the position. I knew it certainly would help facilitate me getting this job.

Tessie exclaimed that she believed her experiences also prepared her for the assistant superintendency. Tessie explained:

My rich background, to me, is my greatest asset in this position. By that, what I mean is I've taught middle school, I've taught high school, I've been a high school assistant principal, I've been an elementary principal. I've been at all levels. For me, I think it's just those rich experiences and that I've had an opportunity to serve a lot of different levels.

Describing her entry-exit passage, Vanessa stated she believed her education prepared her for the assistant superintendency. She stated:

I think it's a combination of things. I think education is a portion of it. I say that because I also have a degree in psychology which helps you to deal with people, and personalities, and understanding those things. The leadership training that I received at one southeastern university was awesome for me. It really was. It gave me a different viewpoint on what I thought it meant to be a leader.

Vanessa also cited her principal experience prepared her for the assistant superintendency job. Vanessa stated:

I'm going to be honest with you. Being a principal prepared me for this job. When you're in a principal's role, you deal with everything under the sun. You deal with the personnel, the children, the parent complaints, the selecting of your staff, the non-renewal of your staff, and like I said, two very different kinds of middle schools where I served as principal. So I had the opportunity, and I was afforded the opportunity to know and to learn all different kinds of people that I would have to interact with. I'm going to be honest with you. Knowing how to handle people, I think, that's where I probably learned to be a listener because when

you're dealing with parents you ought to listen to what their concerns are even when you don't want to which has been invaluable in this position.

Like Tessie and Vanessa, Jasmine also felt that her education prepared her for the assistant superintendency. Jasmine voiced, "I think your experiences throughout your education or professional education helps." In regards to experience contributing to her preparation for the assistant superintendency, she stated, "I think your experiences throughout your education or professional education helps."

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared experiences in the immersion-emersion passage. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared their experiences of noticing shocks and surprises while being immersed in middle space leadership. Tessie described the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space leadership. Describing her biggest shocks and surprises regarding personnel, Tessie stated:

The biggest shock, the biggest surprise, for me, was the personnel. I'm just going to use the word issues, for lack of a better word, personnel issues that my superintendent has to deal with on a daily basis. I think I had been a little sheltered from that. I didn't realize that. I remember we had a couple of things going on when I was first hired in. I remember that first week, he said, 'Sit down. We need to talk.' It was things that in my little principal world, I didn't have a clue. I mean, we have 350 people that work for us. You're going to have personnel decisions and personnel issues that you have to manage. That was probably my biggest shock, just because I didn't do that as much as a principal. I didn't have as much of that to manage, because I had a much smaller staff working under me.

Like Tessie, Vanessa also experienced shocks and surprises in the immersion-emersion passage. Describing the biggest adjustment she had to make being a middle space leader, Vanessa realized the pressure that exists when making decisions in the middle.

Describing the shocks and surprises in the immersion-emersion passage, Vanessa summarized:

Sometimes the pressure comes because I am the middle man. 'Go tell her [superintendent] this.' The pressure is not just go tell her this, then I get the emails and the phone calls. People think that I'm a changer, a change agent, and sometimes a game changer. That pressure to always be that, sometimes, is too great because you do want to support the people, but also she [superintendent] is my boss as well.

Describing the shocks and surprises in the immersion-emersion passage, Jasmine realized that being a middle space leader kept her immersed in her job duties and responsibilities. She stated, "There was never a dull moment. Constantly, you're flip flopping from one thing to another. I do think part of that is the fact that I have special education and federal programs. There's never any downtime ever."

Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared experiences in the disintegration-reintegration passage. The female assistant superintendents disintegrated old, past ways. Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared their experiences of how they had to dismiss past ways of thinking or acting to succeed as middle space leaders that included them no longer being in the same social circles. They became integrated in the middle space realizing they now have middle power. In this passage, they also realized they have middle power and utilize it. The novice female assistant superintendents all described



how they had dismissed old ways as a result of being in the middle space. Tessie described her experiences letting go of supervising from the local school level to now supervising the district stating:

I think the biggest thing is you go from being focused on 650 kids, 45 teachers, and the happenings in one building to being focused on 2,800 kids, over 300 teachers, and the happenings in seven different buildings. It's actually been fun, if that makes sense, because as a principal in my own building, I didn't even know, a lot of times, when such incredible things were going on in other buildings. So it's been a lot of fun to get out of that box and go see what everybody's doing K-12 in the district. That is an adjustment because I've got to praise, I've got to publicize, I've got to give credit to not just those 40 people that are working for me in my school. Now, I've got a lot more people I've got to think of and try to spread that love and spread myself out. I think that was probably the biggest out with the old, in with the new for me.

Realizing she now has middle power, Tessie shared her experiences stating she used her middle power to make decisions that pertained to her area stating, “Yes, especially in my lane, like I said.” Referring to her middle power, she further stated:

I think it's respected in that because I'm going to spend a lot of time gathering information and being thoughtful about those decisions and asking their opinion. That's just huge. If they feel like they've had input, they being principals and leaders in schools, even if you don't make the decision they want you to make, a lot of times they can live with it if they felt like you at least listened to them. Just

listen to me. I think they respect that somebody's ultimately got to make a final decision.

Vanessa described her experiences letting go of some of her past relationships stating:

Changing some of those relationships, people who I served with as principals with, we couldn't have that same communication. Those gripes and complaining sessions that you have on the phone, I couldn't do that anymore because my role then became I might be the person that has to recommend your termination. You have to add a little separation in there.

Realizing she now has middle power, Vanessa shared her experiences stating she used her middle power to make decisions that pertained to her area stating, "The lower level positions those are pretty much mine to make. Principals make recommendations to me, and I pretty much yea or nay it." Vanessa also recalled what the former assistant superintendent shared with her regarding power stating, "The former assistant superintendent, she said, 'You know this is a very powerful position.'" Like I said, I don't use the title. I just recently started signing it that way. I don't use the power for that purpose. I've used the power to make the decisions."

Jasmine described her experiences letting go of supervising from the local school level to now supervising the district stating:

The roles had changed. Instead of the peer to peer, colleague to colleague, it's leadership versus. I shouldn't say versus, but the roles are different. That reception is different. You work at central office. You don't work at the school now. Those interpersonal relationships change somewhat.

Realizing she now has middle power, Jasmine shared her experiences stating she used her middle power to make decisions that pertained to her area sharing that this can be positive or negative. She explained, “If it's a decision that's going to benefit somebody, nine times out of ten, it's not going to benefit someone else, and trying to get to that happy medium that does the best for everyone can be difficult.”

The transformation-restabilization passage encompasses competence and confidence. The female assistant superintendents have become more competent and confident as a result of passing through the other passages. They also have learned new approaches to problem-solving and decision making as well as the importance of reflection. Describing how she is now more competent and confident, Tessie shared:

I'm going to tell you, this is my personal opinion but I really believe this, the key to becoming confident and competent in any job is the willingness and the ability to say, 'I don't know.' It's the key. People that are not confident are people who do not trust themselves enough to say or do not respect the situation enough to say, 'You know what? I don't really know. Give me some time to find out.' That's competence, too. Competence, to me, is knowing what you know and knowing what you don't know

Tessie also shared she has learned new approaches to problem-solving and decision making. She stated:

First of all, you've got to realize it's not personal, and it's not about you. I had to answer a parent a couple weeks ago. He didn't really like what I said, but I'm fine with saying to him, 'You know, I'm not your last resort. If you're not happy with a

decision I make, you have access to Dr. Superintendent. He'll be happy to listen to you.' That doesn't bother me to say that to a parent, so that helps. I think, dealing with it, is knowing I can say, 'You don't have to live with my decision.' I can only think of a few times in my leadership career where I felt like I just was really emotionally distressed about a decision.

She further shared reflection is so important. Tessie shared:

Reflection is so, so important. It's the key to growing. If you don't think through and reflect over what you've done, decisions, that kind of, you're doomed to either make the same mistakes again or follow a process that's not very successful, so that's really important.

Describing how she is now more competent and confident, Vanessa shared:

I've always been secure in what I know. I'm not afraid to share what I know. I don't think that I'm cocky, and I think that's an asset because there is a huge difference between confidence, and arrogance, but I do know what I know. I think this role has made me more confident because I'm still not arrogant, and I'm going to hold to that because I am presenter. I have to be out front many of the times. After a board meeting the mic might become stuck in my face, and it's some impromptu thing I've got to talk about, so I've had to build my own confidence, but I'm going to be honest with you that's a lot of prayer. A lot of that is asking the Lord to guide my thoughts, my actions, my tongue, give me wisdom, give me strength, so prayer plays a big part in all of that for me.

Vanessa also shared she has learned new approaches to problem-solving and decision making. Sharing she has learned to not overthink everything, Vanessa stated:

What I have learned, you can overthink everything if you allow yourself to do that. I'm an over-thinker. I've had to learn to compensate for that. I don't really second-guess my work, but I'm going to do so much research I'm going to have too much information.

Vanessa added that she has learned to delete and not dwell on things. Describing her experiences, she shared:

The delete button on the computer is something. I'll give you a real quick example. I had someone who was a habitual offender. Before I became this assistant superintendent she had done stuff so many times I don't know why she was still working with us, but then when I started dealing with it I'm fair, but I'm firm, and I know that about me. I called her to my office, and she said, 'Well, they always just write me up or something.' I said, 'Well, I'm suspending you without pay. That's going to be my recommendation. That delete button it may sound insensitive, but I do delete things. When I'm done I'm done.'

Vanessa further shared reflection is so important. Vanessa shared:

I'm very reflective in nature. You have to look back at yourself. You have to look back at situations. I'm my biggest critic, I am. I stay here to reflect. What could I have done better? Was this the best decision? Is there something I can do to improve something? Even the conversations that I have with people there have been countless times when I'll pick up the phone, and I keep a notebook on my

desk, and one in my drawer. I take down contact numbers of people that I deal with on a day-to-day basis. That's for a lot of reasons for follow-up, sometimes, because I don't think I handled it just right. I will call and apologize. I know, sometimes, I'm very direct, so I'll call and say, "I could have said this better." I reflect back on those every day. I reflect about how I treat the people in this office every day.

Describing how she is now more competent and confident, Jasmine shared she still questions things but is definitely more competent and confident. Jasmine shared:

I still question things. Am I making the best decision possible? That's a weakness probably, but overall much more confident. I think competent has been there, yes, more reading the code, reading the forms. Simple experience has helped that competency also. Having dealt with similar situations has helped make decisions.

Jasmine also shared she has learned new approaches to problem-solving and decision making. Jasmine stated:

I've learned sometimes you cannot just make a decision immediately when a question is asked. Sometimes you have to sit and process and look at the big board metaphorically and think it through before agreeing or disagreeing. Thinking through that problem is something that I've learned for sure.

Jasmine further shared reflection is so important. Jasmine shared:

I think it's important for growth. If you don't look back and think of different ways to handle it, I don't see how you can grow from it. I also think we cannot

fixate on the past decisions. We can grow from them and improve, but we cannot keep beating each other up over possibly poor decisions.

**Challenges.** Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine experienced challenges while in middle space leadership. The challenges consisted of experiencing vertical or lateral pressure or a combination of vertical and lateral pressure. Vertical pressure results from pressure working between upper management and lower level workers whereas lateral pressure results from pressure working between administrators and teachers and staff, students, and parents.

Tessie only experienced lateral pressure. Tessie did not experience vertical pressure because her relationship with the principals is one in which there is an understanding of respect that exists between her and the principals. Confirming she does not experience vertical pressure, Tessie stated, “No, I think our principals are pretty respectful of not pitting the two of us against each other. I think that's been a pretty smooth thing for us.” Although not experiencing vertical pressure, Tessie did experience lateral pressure with parents in the community. Confirming this pressure is harder, she recalled the challenge of adhering to confidentiality when engaged in conversations with parents about staff, Tessie explained:

That can be harder. Yeah, that can be harder. I'm active in my community and in my church, and I've been here for so long that people don't mind telling me what they think which is not a bad thing, but it can be sometimes. I think the hard thing is sometimes I can't explain to people why decisions were made, especially when they're relative to confidentiality of a student or confidentiality of an employee.

In addition to Tessie experiencing lateral pressure, Vanessa disclosed she experienced both vertical and lateral pressure. Describing the vertical pressure she experienced from expectations that she is the change agent, Vanessa confirmed:

Absolutely, because I'm out there every day and because she has this huge heart and people love her. Sometimes the pressure comes because I am the middle man. 'Go tell her this.' The pressure is not just go tell her this then I get the emails and the phone calls. People think that I'm a changer, a change agent, and sometimes a game changer. That pressure to always be that, sometimes, is too great because you do want to support the people, but also she is my boss as well. Being in that middle space, sometimes, is a very hard place to be in, especially, since I opened myself up to that, but I will tell you this. It has helped me to understand why the assistant sits before me, or the way that they left. It's harder to be this way. It's harder when you're approachable because then everybody will approach you. It's hard when you are a listener because they know you will hear anything and try to support. That brings on the pressure.

Additionally, Vanessa disclosed her experiences describing the pressure she felt working between administration and lower level workers. Describing the lateral pressure she experienced working with the board attorney, Vanessa revealed:

The attorney and I, sometimes, we disagree, and there's pressure to go one way or another. I'm one who I'll listen to reason, but just because you are this I respect the fact that you may have more knowledge to me mainly in that area, but it does not mean that you're always right, but it also doesn't mean that I'm always right. I



have people on speed dial that's going to give me good information. As a matter of fact, my oldest child, my daughter is an attorney who practices employment law so when we tend to disagree, and I'm getting that pressure to go one way or another, she's a good sounding board, and she's very headstrong.

In addition to Tessie and Vanessa experiencing pressure, Jasmine also experienced pressure. Describing vertical pressure regarding decisions from upper management, Jasmine shared, “Sometimes there are those who have one answer to things and when a different answer is given, it's not received in the most positive way, and you try to get them to understand why the decision was made.” However, Jasmine stated she does not experience lateral pressure due to participating in decision making and fully understanding the decisions. When asked whether she experiences lateral pressure, Jasmine stated, “Not so much, no, because before those type of decisions are typically made, myself and the other administrators have already had a discussion and we tend to be, at least we present a united front.” She further stated that she considered lateral pressure more of aggravation when parents complain to her. Describing her aggravation, Jasmine stated, “I don't know if pressure is the right word because if they're [parents are] going to bring it up, obviously it's important to them. Pressure's not it. Aggravation may be a nice word sometimes, just having to restate.”

**Veteran female assistant superintendents’ experiences as middle space leaders.** Seven themes emerged from thoroughly analyzing the veteran female assistant superintendents’ responses to the interview questions that required the veteran female assistant superintendents to share their experiences which are displayed in Table 12. The results revealed that all three veteran female assistant superintendents described their

experiences by describing their location, function, tasks, roles, relationships, passages, and challenges.

**Location.** All three veteran female assistant superintendents divulged they work in an area that is below the superintendent. All veteran female assistant superintendents responded they answer to the superintendent. Thus, they act as middle managers because they work in an area between upper management and lower management. When asked where her position falls in the organizational chart, Pearl responded, “I answer only to the superintendent and the board.” When asked are there times when she works between upper management and lower level workers, Pearl responded, “There is a constant process of sharing information from the superintendent down.”

When asked where her position falls in the organizational chart, Shirley responded, “I’m number two behind the superintendent obviously senior level administration with one level on the organizational chart above me and that’s the office of the superintendent.” When asked if there are times when she works between upper management and lower level workers, Shirley responded, “Yeah, I’d say so.”

When asked where her position falls in the organizational chart, Kerrie responded, “I am directly under the superintendent, and I work closely with the CSFO as well. I am, guess you would say, second in command.” When asked if there are times when she works between upper management and lower level workers, Kerrie responded, “I’m usually the one person that is meeting with the schools acting as principal liaison bridging the principals with the superintendent since I am the principal liaison. I always keep the superintendent informed of what is going on.”

**Function.** All three veteran female assistant superintendents functioned both as managers and system integrators. Responsible for specific areas, they functioned as managers. They also functioned as system integrators as they worked with their peers and colleagues to keep things in perspective and maintain balance within the organization between upper management and lower level workers.

Sharing her experiences as a manager, Pearl revealed she managed principals, student services, and the technology department. When asked whether she had a particular area or areas she oversees, Pearl responded, “I directly supervise 26 schools and the staffs and principals of those 26 schools. I also, at the central office level, supervise student services, which handles a lot of our discipline problems, and I supervise the IT department.” Pearl also shared experiences whereas she worked with peers and colleagues as a system integrator to keep things balanced between upper management and lower level workers. Describing her experiences functioning as a system integrator, Pearl explained how as assistant superintendent, she integrates and networks between the superintendent and principals to keep things balanced between the two entities. She stated, “We [assistant superintendents] are the direct source of information or assistance for those groups of principals.” She further explained how the superintendent will have her work between the principals and him. Pearl stated, “He [superintendent] would tell us we need to meet with our principals and share some information or gather some information from principals to make some decisions.”

Sharing her experiences as a manager, Shirley revealed she managed federal programs and curriculum. Shirley stated, “Primarily, my duties are federal programs and curriculum. Those are the two broad areas and obviously under those I have several

different roles that I play.” Shirley also shared experiences whereas she works with peers and colleagues as a system integrator to keep things balanced between upper management and lower level workers. Describing her experiences functioning as a system integrator, Shirley explained how she keeps things balanced working between the two entities stating:

Obviously, he [superintendent] doesn't have time to deal with everything that might come up in the school building or if it's a concern of our principals. In a lot of ways my role is to filter that information or deal with that situation. I think to talk about how to sustain that position, I think my effectiveness in handling those things as a liaison between him and administrators, I think that sustains me in this position.

To keep things balanced between the superintendent and the principals, she added that she functions as someone whom the principals can discuss concerns stating, “Dr. Superintendent may issue a mandate and principals may come back and talk to me about some of the challenges of implementing that mandate the way that he's asked them to do that.”

Sharing her experiences as a manager, Kerrie revealed, “I am the director of federal programs, technology coordinator, I coordinate curriculum. I have supervision over the administrators and schools. I’m involved a lot with personnel and the day to day operations of our district.” Describing her experiences functioning as a system integrator, Kerrie explained how she keeps things balanced working between upper management and lower level workers stating that she helps the principals understand tasks the superintendent has mandated. Kerrie stated:

I do a lot of listening from principals' standpoint. Principals will say, 'Tell me what do you think about these things the superintendent has mandated.'

Necessarily it can be handled here taking it to him, but then again, there are times we all sit down and we talk about an issue so it's not that he's not involved but a lot of times it's not something to the level that he needs to be involved. We can handle it from this level; then we move on.

Kerrie added that principals will first contact her when they want the superintendent to approve their idea. Kerrie stated, "You know I am the first line of communication and then I'll bring the idea to him and he would say, 'Yes go ahead and tell them to do that.'"

*Tasks.* All three veteran assistant superintendents shared their experiences of acting as a subordinate by taking orders, superior by giving orders, an equal by being a peer or colleague, and a delegator and doer. Pearl shared her experiences functioning as the superintendent's subordinate by taking orders from her superintendent. She shared that she sees her orders more as requests to gather information. Pearl explained:

The only times he would do that [give orders] would be when he would tell us we need to meet with our principals and share some information or gather some information from principals to make some decisions.

Shirley shared her experiences functioning as the superintendent's subordinate by taking orders from her superintendent. As the superintendent's subordinate, Shirley explained:

There are times that the superintendent may issue a directive. You have to follow through with that directive sometimes regardless of whether you agree. You just have your marching orders, and you have to do what is asked of you.

Kerrie shared her experiences functioning as a subordinate by taking orders. Like Pearl, Kerrie sees her orders more as requests from the superintendent. She added that she also takes requests from the chief school financial officer. Kerrie explained:

Well, I don't know if their orders or I would say yes, if you want to call it orders. I think that's a little strong word, but again it goes back to if my superintendent is out of town and, or he's not able to attend to something. That would be considered an order. You know my CSFO asks for me to do certain things, but I don't think it's an order. I think it's a request because he'll say, 'I need you to do something or do this because it is due.' It's not an order. I don't know, but I think order is too strong. You know more of an operational function than just an order. A request is a softer landing than order to me. Now, I would say now being assistant superintendent, probably the person I would take orders from would either be the chairman of the board or either the superintendent.

In addition to sharing their experiences functioning as a subordinate, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie also shared experiences about functioning as superiors by giving orders. Pearl shared her experiences functioning as a superior by giving orders to principals and to others who work at Central Office in the departments she is responsible for overseeing. Pearl described:

I sometimes have to give orders to my principals in saying this is how we're going to do a certain thing or this is the steps we're going to follow. I have to give orders when units are assigned as to how many teacher units are going to be given and how they're going to utilize them. At the central office level, I would give orders

to individuals in the two departments I supervise by saying this is how we're going to clean the house as far as the computers, what level computers, how we're going to organize. In student services, there are the procedures we're going to follow for transfers. These are the procedures we're going to follow for handling discipline problems. I handle the alternative school, what are the programs we're going to do there, how we're going to admit children, how we're not, and what are some of the other options.

Similarly, Shirley shared her experiences functioning as a superior by giving orders to teachers, administrators, and counselors. When asked whether there are times she gives orders, Shirley replied:

Yes, there are. If there are certain protocols and processes or procedures that are developed from my office whether they're for teachers or administrators, that's what I expect. An example is lesson plans. We have a lesson plan template that we've developed. Every teacher is expected to use it. There's a certain way we want lesson plans on your desk on Monday mornings in a binder. That's the expectation and there's really no negotiating in that. I have different, for counselors for example, certain forms and things that have to be turned into me, there's a certain time in which I want them, certain way in which I want them.

There's no sense in negotiating, that just let's just do it this way, yeah, certainly.

Like Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie shared her experiences functioning as a superior by giving orders. Kerrie added she does give orders, but sometimes she sees it as providing guidance. Kerrie explained, "I do give orders. I like to view that as guidance. I give that

as, but it is an order when there are deadlines to make, there are timelines to be honored, there's issues with parents to be addressed with personnel.” When asked to whom she gives orders, she shared, “It could be a principal; it could be maintenance. It could be IT technician, any entity under me, central office staff.”

Not only do the veteran female assistant superintendents function as subordinates and superiors by taking and giving orders, but they also function as equals by acting as peers or colleagues. Pearl shared her experiences describing her function as an equal discussing her functionality with her colleagues. Sharing her experiences, she stated:

There are times when I am meeting with the principals and it's in an informal setting, and I would say they see me as a colleague. I'm not sure they ever see us, either of the two of us who are in this position, as a peer. They see us, because they know we're still the boss, and for them they see us as their boss. I think they see us as a colleague to talk to, but I'm not sure they see us as a peer.

Shirley shared her experiences describing her function as an equal discussing her functionality with her peers. In fact, Shirley described her tasks as a peer or colleague sharing it is professional in nature. Shirley revealed:

I think there are a lot of times that I'm seen as a peer. Some of the people that I work with regardless of their position, we may be about the same age. I just think knowing people in other settings, they view you as a peer and you view them as a peer, but it still doesn't change the professional relationship. I actually have genuine friendships with teachers and administrators but it's respectful, and they don't cross any work lines.



Kerrie described her experience functioning both as a peer and colleague. She described functioning in this sense helps her stay connected to various groups. Kerrie shared her experiences stating:

Yes, there are, and you know I feel like I need to stay connected in that sense. I function as peer or colleague to everyone. If it's participation in a grade level meeting and they are looking to do something different or textbook meeting, I'm functioning for them not just to the compliance of the program. I participate. I sometimes lead, but at the end of the day, I want their opinions. I want to gather their thoughts because it goes back to they are the ones that are actually doing the implementing. It could be with a peer or colleague; it's with teachers, principals, central office staff, lunchroom staff, bus workers, principals, sometimes we problem solve.

In addition to functioning as subordinates by taking orders, superiors by giving orders, and equals by acting as peers or colleagues, female assistant superintendents also function as delegators and doers. In describing her experience acting as both a delegator and doer, Pearl proclaimed she indeed performs this task and even provided an example stating:

Yes, times when for instance, when we work on different committees at the district level. Let me give you, for instance, the calendar committee. We do school wide calendars, district wide calendars, and we bring in a team of people from different schools that work on this calendar, this is parents, this is teachers, this is actually students in central office. We'll assign each of them responsibilities

to go back to their different peers and bring it back. Yeah, I would do some of that on a committee basis. We looked at committees on how we were organizing the school day based on scheduling, whether it was an alternate block or straight block or a seven period day, and we gathered people from the schools and assigned them responsibilities to go back and gather.

Like Pearl, Shirley also acted as both a delegator and doer. Sharing her experience acting as a delegator and doer with school improvement plans and assessment, Shirley stated:

Most definitely, those times are frequent. One is CIP's. The principals in the schools have to do it, but they also need my guidance to get it done. I have to help them with that. That's just one example. My assessment coach is new, so the student assessment is her responsibility to do, but I've got to help her get it done because she's new and she doesn't know what to do there.

Similarly, Kerrie acted as both a delegator and doer. Kerrie shared her experience acting as a delegator and doer also providing examples of how she functions in the dual role adding that she tries to not be seen as micromanaging principals. Kerrie explained:

Yes, I do a lot of assigning tasks, but I also complete the task, and I'll work with them on a task. You know if it's a summer program and they're trying to coordinate their funding or they're trying to coordinate their bus routes or they're trying to coordinate personnel or you know, I'll sit down with them and coach them through it, but at the end, it's going to be their project. You try to do that so you're not micromanaging their project.

**Roles.** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie shared experiences that reflect three roles. All veteran female assistant superintendents shared experiences that show they act as a bridger, buffer, and boundary spanner. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared similar experiences acting as a bridger connecting upper management with lower level workers. The veteran assistant superintendents also shared their experiences acting as a buffer serving as a protector of the organization, preventing uproars in the organization. Additionally, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie shared their experiences acting as a boundary spanner searching for information and data to improve the organization.

Pearl shared experiences revealing how she acts as a bridger as a middle space leader. Pearl described her experiences bridging central office with the schools stating:

Absolutely, there are many times we do that, because the departments I supervise, I am the liaison between there. I'm also the liaison with schools. We are organized as a central office to work with providing services to, we divide the school into six divisions or six different teams, and I'm over one of the teams. There is a constant process of doing sharing information from the superintendent down, so yeah that happens on a regular basis.

Shirley shared experiences revealing how she acts as a bridger as a middle space leader. Shirley reminisced she bridges the gap between the superintendent and principals. In this case, the superintendent issued a mandate to the principals and the principals reached out to her for further understanding. Shirley divulged indeed she is bridger confirming, "I bridge that gap and say, 'Hey, talk to the superintendent about maybe doing it differently and give him reasons as to why and help to reframe his thinking around things.'" Shirley further stated the principals will reach out to her if they have any questions about the

superintendent's directive, and she, in fact, does act as a bridger closing gaps between the superintendent and principals whereas the principals ask her questions about whether the superintendent will allow them to do something their way. Shirley expressed, "Questions, yeah, 'Does he [superintendent] understand that this is what we're [principals are] doing and is it possible that we [principals] can do it this way?' Yeah, I help him [the superintendent] see their [principals'] side. Kerrie shared experiences revealing how she acts as a bridger in the middle space. Kerrie described her experiences bridging the superintendent with the principals explaining, "I'm usually the one person that is meeting with the schools acting as principal liaison bridging the principals with the superintendent since I am the principal liaison. I always keep the superintendent informed of what is going on."

In addition to acting as a bridger, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie shared similar experiences acting as a buffer by serving as a protector preventing uproars in the organization. As a middle space leader, Pearl shared experiences revealing how she acts as a buffer on behalf of the superintendent to help solve problems between the unions and employees responding:

Yes, even just as recently as this morning, when there is a problem in the local school, the unions (we have three of them in this district) often come to us because the other deputy superintendent and myself are the ones they come to handle problems at the school, to deal with organizational issues such as an employee doesn't like they've been written up, an employee has done this or that, and they come to us and we work with human resources to handle those issues.

Also, Shirley shared her experiences as a buffer. She shared that she is always prepared for adversity and has realized to keep the superintendent informed. She stated:

I've talked a lot about anticipating outcomes. I'm big on that, being proactive. Some of that just comes by virtue of being in the district as long as I have. Where problems might occur or issues might occur. I always try to be prepared for the adversity. Then the things that I feel that the superintendent might not be aware of, making sure that he's knowledgeable. It's all just to prevent, as you've said, any uproars or any problems or any disruptions in the organization.

Additionally, Kerrie shared experiences that shows she acts as a buffer. Kerrie shared her experiences as she buffers every day stating:

Every day, you know it is something from as minute from the car pick-up line at the elementary school to the lunchroom menus to AP classes to dual enrollment classes to losing a football game on Friday night. You are always on call so to speak to be at the mercy of that person that wants to create the conversation that maybe a little bit negative because the public expects you to give them that time whether you're in the grocery store, you're in the office, wherever you are they expect that from you; however, it can be on the flip side. It can be an informational conversation that a parent or someone out in the community says tell me more about this or let me hear about this. You might be a buffer for a teacher who has had a run in with a parent. They may want to tell you about the situation. You may have to be the buffer for that teacher, principal, or head coach. Again, it goes back to listening.

Besides acting as a bridger and buffer, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all share similar experiences in that they all act as a boundary spanner collecting information and data to help improve their organizations. Pearl shared experiences revealing how she acts as a boundary spanner seeking information to improve the organization as a middle space leader. Pearl shared:

If you're asking do we seek information or outside sources for information, yes. We look at all the data that relates to the school. We also attend professional development training and go to both state and national training meetings to provide assistance to principals. Most recently, we've been to SSRR, which is the high school that works program in Atlanta and in Louisville to gain training to help with schools' development. We've used that. We've also tried to go to the AAAA meetings to gain information about how we can help the schools and what other schools are doing.

Shirley shared experiences revealing how she acts as a boundary spanner seeking information to improve the organization as a middle space leader. Responding to whether she collects information and data to improve the organization, Shirley shared:

We do, again a lot of it is student assessment data which is where we start and helping principals make sense of that and helping them formulate plans based on that. Internally, we administer benchmark assessments that give us information. I survey teachers as well as administrators on professional development needs, which also when I start looking outside of the district. I'm looking what the trends are, what other districts are doing locally throughout the state, throughout the

country. If there's a need that we have that we're trying to find a creative solution for, I am responsible for bringing that back. To elaborate and just to give an example, at a conference we saw a tool, a device that really would put our STEM academy at the next level offered by a vendor. Something I do often is to bring the vendors in, let principals see what's there, and how we can use it. We've just done that.

Kerrie shared experiences revealing how she acts as a boundary spanner seeking information to improve the organization as a middle space leader. Responding to whether she collects information and data to improve the organization, Kerrie shared:

We do, data is ultra important in so many ways. Again, I go back to you know if we're spending money for personnel or additional personnel, we need to have a needs assessment done. We need to see where we started, what it took to get it going, what funding did it require, and where did we end up, and if that is proof that what we invested in and whether it was worthwhile.

***Relationships.*** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared experiences about their relationships with peers and colleagues, upper management, lower level workers, and mentoring relationships. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all maintained relationships with peers and colleagues. When describing their experiences of their relationships with peers and colleagues, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared their experiences with their relationships with peers and colleagues.

When describing her experiences with peers and colleagues as a relationship, one such interaction with the other assistant superintendent came to mind. Pearl recalled:

Yes, the other deputy and I often will sit down together after we've looked at things, and he'll bring it to both of us and say, 'Look at it and then we'll sit down and talk about it and give him input. He did that this morning on some other papers and a job description, and we went back and said, 'This is what we think you need to look at.' Yeah, he'll come by and bring us things.

When describing her experiences with her relationships with peers and colleagues, Shirley reminisces her relationships both inside and outside of school. Shirley described her key relationships with teachers stating:

Most of it's inside of school but occasionally outside of work. In my opinion, especially teachers, they're the people that know the real pulse of the building, and it's real helpful to maintain those relationships so that if there's any situation, you can always go to those people and say, 'Hey, tell me what's really going on with this.' Trust is important, what I'm getting after, and you have to build that with peers and colleagues.

When describing her experiences with her relationships with peers and colleagues, Kerrie reminisces about her relationships both inside and outside of school. Kerrie described her experience with relationships with peers and colleagues sharing that she wants their input. She explained:

We don't want to avoid it; you have to have the assurance on some decisions that you're making the right decisions and those are big decisions, not the day to day decisions. When we're making district decisions, you want to get input. You don't want to isolate a group, or you don't want to isolate a certain group of



people because it could impact them somehow so we network a lot. We network in informal places, maybe at a ballgame. Then, we'll have principals' meeting where we'll have a formal agenda, and we're working through it.

When sharing their experiences about relationships with upper management, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared the same experience of participating in shared leadership with their superintendents. Pearl described her experience as engagement in shared leadership stating:

He's [superintendent] very much a collaborative leader. Decision making in the district, the superintendent has a cabinet, and the cabinet makes most of the decisions and the recommendations to the superintendent. The cabinet is composed of the chief financial officer and the three deputies [assistant superintendents], and that's it. Decision making, recommendations, of course the superintendent makes the decisions, but a great number of times, we meet every week at least once, so do we have the knowledge or the know of what's going to happen ahead of time.

When describing her experience with shared leadership with the superintendent, Shirley stated:

I think as a show of trust in his senior administrators, we have a lot of say so. He really respects our opinions, he asks for them. Whether it's personnel, whether it's money, whether it's instruction, whether it's building a school building we have meetings about how the building process is going to go. He is inclusive and I

think it's a mutual respect for us. While he can make decisions all by himself, he chooses not to.

When describing her experience with shared leadership with the superintendent, Kerrie explained:

It is very transparent. I provide my opinions and my thoughts on it. Yes, we will have a discussion. Then, I will look at the end of the conversation and know it's his final decision to make suspension of personnel, or disciplinary actions, or you know the dismissals of schools. Those things that impact the whole district unless he ordered me to do it, then he would make it, but again it would be a simple conversation, 'Hey, what do you think about this; I think we're going to do this. You let the principals know we're going to have early dismissal.'

In addition to describing their experiences with shared leadership with the superintendent, both Pearl and Shirley shared their experiences with their superintendents also acting as teachers who explained the rationale behind changing a decision they had made. Pearl explained:

He's usually very good at saying 'Why, let's talk about why I want to go another way'. Sometimes I'll say, 'You know I just don't see that,' and he'll say, 'Do you feel strongly about it?' 'Yeah.' 'Okay, we won't go that way.' But if I say, 'I see your side, okay, I understand.' He's very caring, and very much a people person.

When describing her experience learning from the superintendent, Shirley stated:

It was a learning experience. He never turns you down, tells you no about something without an explanation. While I might not like the answer, I can respect the answer because I understand where it's coming from. It makes you more thoughtful, again teaches you to anticipate, 'Oh, I didn't think of that; maybe I should've thought of that.' It's okay to be, it's not a bad thing to have your superintendent say, 'Hey why don't we do it this way.' It's a learning experience.

When sharing their experiences about relationships with lower level workers needed to sustain their position as middle space leaders, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie described also maintaining positive relationships with lower level workers as a factor in sustaining their position. Realizing the importance of relationships, they all identified pertinent relationships that have enabled them to be able to sustain their positions. When asked to describe her experiences with the relationships that have helped her sustain her position in the middle space, Pearl responded,

Collegial relationships with the staff and the principals, they have to trust you. They have to know that you're listening to them. They have to know that what they say is of value. They have to know that you care enough to listen. I think a collegial relationship with central office and with the principals.

When asked what relationships are pertinent to your success as assistant superintendent, Pearl responded:

I think the relationships that are pertinent and the relationships you have to have, a collaborative relationship with both the principals and the central office. You cannot work in isolation or think your way is the only way. You've got to be

willing to listen to everyone and realize that collaboration, and it may not be their way is going to work or your way is going to work. It's probably somewhere in the middle. You've got to listen to others.

In regards to lower level workers, Pearl also described her experiences regarding the importance of maintaining the relationship with principals as middle space leaders. Pearl described her relationship with principals as one whereas she supervises principals:

I'm the direct supervisor of 26 principals, so I evaluate those principals. As far as training or providing assistance, when they do need help or assistance, that group of principals or even the other group will call and we are the direct source of information or assistance for those groups of principals.

When asked what relationships have helped sustain her position, Shirley responded, "You have to have good working relationships with all levels of administration, teachers, students, community members. They're all important."

Describing her experiences with sustaining the relationship with principals to help sustain her position in middle space, Shirley described her experiences with principals as one whereas she is an instructional leader:

Instructional leader primarily is the primary role I've played for principals in helping them to guide their buildings instructionally. I do have a role in training principals. As a matter of fact, I'm responsible for all the professional development in the district for teachers as well as administrators. Beyond helping them decide on their building PD and setting up PD for the district, I do a lot with helping them interpret data scores and making plans based on what we're seeing

in their buildings related to student assessment data. In terms of working relationships, we're a small school district so I think I have a very good working relationship with all of the principals in the buildings.

When Kerrie was asked what relationships helped sustain her in this position, Kerrie answered:

My administrative staff, my immediate office, personnel in my office, respective instructional staff, really the entire staff, I believe that no matter what capacity you're in, if I'm the assistant superintendent, I need to be able to listen to the cafeteria worker, relate to bus driver I need to be able to relate to the maintenance supervisor. I need to be able to relate to parents. I need them to know that I am aware of what is going on in this district, and I want them to know that I work hard. I want them to know that I absolutely do my best to be fair. I think fair is a big issue with people these days. They want to be treated fairly.

Kerrie described her relationship with principals as one that is varied stating she just wants to ensure principals are successful. Kerrie explained:

My relationship with the principals is varied. In my opinion, they know I have supervision but I really like to look at it more as a person of guidance. We function as an administrative team. We do a great amount of planning together.

In addition to describing their relationships with principals, they described their mentoring relationships which consisted of their experiences mentoring others. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all described their experiences as a commitment to mentoring others.

Describing her experience mentoring others as providing help and assistance to principals, Pearl stated:

I evaluate those principals. As far as training or providing assistance, when they do need help or assistance, that group of principals or even the other group, will call and we are the direct source of information or assistance for those groups of principals. We also attend professional development training and go to both state and national training meetings to provide assistance to principals.

Describing her experience mentoring others, Shirley stated:

I informally mentor, like I said we've had some turnover in administration, and I informally mentor them. I'm actually the liaison for the state mentoring program so I mentor teachers. We do a series of new teacher training meetings about four of them a year that I count as mentoring because I can get in with new teachers and share with them not only about instruction, but if they're new teachers some of the pitfalls and things to look for, just some common sense kind of things. I think that helps. Mentoring is a part of my job.

Describing her experience mentoring others, Kerrie stated:

I do mentor some new people to the profession. I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis. I think it's a very informal way of work plus mentoring, but I do feel like I mentor them. When someone replies, 'Oh yeah, I understand that now. That's a good idea. I need to do it that way, or I wouldn't have thought about doing it that way. I like the way you use those words.' I feel like if I can provide that, then I am providing mentoring on a daily basis and

letting them process the difference in the way they thought it should be and the way we ended up- the way it was going to be.

**Passages.** When transitioning to assistant superintendent, female assistant Superintendents pass through a series of passages. Passages were entry-exit, immersion-emersion, disintegration-reintegration, and transformation-restabilization. During entry-exit, assistant superintendents prepare to transition into the new role of being in middle space while exiting out of their prior role. Entry-exit involves preparing to become assistant superintendent. Immersion-emersion describes assistant superintendents realizing the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space without having any prior training. Disintegration-reintegration describes finding new ways to act in the new role that will lead to succeeding in the middle space which involves acknowledging their middle power to lighten upper management's responsibilities. Transformation-restabilization describes the feelings of competence and confidence in successfully performing their job.

Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared experiences in the entry-exit passage. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared that their education and experience prepared them for the assistant superintendency. Pearl described her experiences transitioning from principal into the role of assistant superintendent. Describing her entry-exit passage, Pearl summarized her transition to the assistant superintendency, stating:

I think the transition period for me was understanding that the people that I had answered to, because remember I came from a principalship, so I had answered to all of these people in this building, and then I had moved from answering to them to them answering to me. It was a reversal in position, so instead of going to them

for getting confirmation that this is what needed to happen or I was doing the right thing, they were coming to me for confirmation. It was changing positions would be what I would say.

When asked about preparation to become assistant superintendent, Pearl discussed indeed she did pursue a specific degree to help prepare her for the assistant superintendency, sharing:

The answer to the degree is yes, because I already had a masters and an Ed.S. in subject area, and I knew that if I wanted to be higher than a teacher/principal, I would have to get the next level of degree. That's what made me seek a higher degree, was knowing I needed to be prepared.

Pearl also disclosed her experience helped prepare her for the assistant superintendency. Pearl disclosed, "I think being principal is probably the best preparation because it helps you deal with a variety of people and a variety of roles."

Additionally, Shirley described her experiences transitioning to become assistant superintendent. Describing her entry-exit passage, Shirley discussed her preparation to enter the assistant superintendency, stating:

Outside of the experience of being a classroom teacher and a school building administrator, those experiences are invaluable. I think you have to have those experiences before ascending to a position like this to really understand how everything works together. I think that experience, some of the training that I had. Again before I became assistant superintendent, the superintendent would allow me to work on some things at the district level to become familiar with it and get



me to start thinking from a school perspective to a school system perspective.

That was beneficial.

When asked about preparation to become assistant superintendent, Shirley discussed both education and experience helped prepare her for the assistant superintendency, sharing:

In addition to official training for a degree in education, taking leadership courses, superintendent courses, I think on the job training. I was a principal that was always very concerned about school budgets. It was important to me to learn the budgeting process for local funds, federal dollars received as well as our state funds. I was also a principal who always sought out creative instructional solutions to problems in the building. I do that here, just on a larger scale. I do it for all schools as opposed to one. I think experience. I think education. I have a couple of degrees in educational leadership. As a building principal you're working on school budgets and school reforms on a smaller scale. As a building principal I did that. Everything from grant writing to creative performance solutions for things that were broken in the school building that I was trying to fix. Budget, wanted to learn that process, needed to know that process and I do that. I just do it on a larger scale here. I think definitely my experience with that helped to prepare me. Some of my college classes I think provided some perspective on senior level positions in school districts. Research and things like that, I've had to do along the way in the graduate programs. Education and experience I guess.

Kerrie described her experiences transitioning from principal into the role of assistant superintendent. Describing her entry-exit passage, Kerrie summarized her transition to the assistant superintendency, stating:

There was not a lot of transition but one thing that really sticks out is I had to learn the appropriate way to exist, to execute that role, and that was the supervision over the principals, the supervision over staff, and that was a transition to that I had to become comfortable with and they had to become comfortable with.

Kerrie added her education and experience prepared her for the assistant superintendency. Kerrie shared, “I was already pursuing my Educational Specialist Degree, but yes, I do think that helped as far as preparing me for additional roles.” She discussed that her experiences at the school level along with being a coordinator as Central Office helped prepare her for the superintendency. Kerrie proclaimed:

I did a lot of leadership things at my school before coming here, and then when I came to central office, I really embraced the opportunity to learn how central office works. You know the funding, the earning of the foundation program. You know physical years. There is so much at the school level that you don’t understand of how the central office works so that really helped me into having opportunities to demonstrate my leadership into growing into that assistant superintendent’s role.

Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared experiences in the immersion-emersion passage. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared their experiences of noticing shocks and

surprises while being immersed in middle space leadership. Pearl described the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space leadership. Describing her biggest shocks and surprises regarding teachers and staff, Pearl stated:

I think the shocks would be you think you'd seen it all, you think having been a principal there are no surprises. You'd be surprised at the number of things, and I don't want to say stupid, but the number of not very thoughtful things that teachers pull. Teachers do things, and you go, surely they didn't do that. Surely somebody had better sense than to do that. You can't be shocked at what, you have teachers and staff doing things that you would never dream, and don't ever say it couldn't happen because it can. The very one thing you think nobody would do something like this, nobody would step out of line with the child. Yeah, those were the surprises for me, is that I guess I was sheltered and I had good teachers, but don't be surprised when somebody pulls something, and you go surely that's not true, and then when you investigate it, yeah it was.

Like Pearl, Shirley described the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space leadership. Describing her biggest shocks and surprises regarding realizing the enormous responsibility that comes along with being a middle space leader, Shirley stated:

I guess I was a little surprised by the sheer volume of work. Having to manage projects, monies, whatever for every school. That can take a lot of doing and because I'm a planner and I like to be organized I guess I had little bit of frustration because you can't just start one project and finish it. You're probably working on fifteen things at the same time. That was a real paradigm shift for me

that all of these projects and initiatives were all ongoing and you just had to go with the flow with that. I've learned to adjust to it but that was probably the biggest surprise for me.

Similar to Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie described the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space leadership. Describing her biggest shocks and surprises regarding realizing the importance of understanding functions at the district level, Kerrie stated:

As a teacher, I never looked at budget analysis. I never knew about function or object codes. I knew we got Title 1 money, but I didn't know how we earned it. I didn't know there was that many rules on how you could spend it. You could get yourself in trouble for special education issues. I didn't know there was a code in special education. I knew what IDEA was. I didn't know there was a separate budget for that. I didn't know the operations of what schools were, the district rather of how you earn things, your ad valorem taxes, the whole gamut of that, the funding. I didn't realize how much planning I had to do. I had to understand the academic year didn't go along with the fiscal year. There were a lot of things the average teacher doesn't understand about program functions. Those things were interesting to me and were very challenging to me until I understood the process.

Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared experiences in the disintegration-reintegration passage. The female assistant superintendents disintegrated old, past ways. Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all shared their experiences of how they had to dismiss past ways of thinking or acting to succeed as middle space leaders that included them no longer being in the same social circles. They became integrated in the middle space realizing they

now have middle power. In this passage, they also realized they have middle power. The veteran female assistant superintendents all described how they had dismissed old ways as a result of being in the middle space. Pearl described her experiences letting go of casual days stating:

I think the thing in schools, there are casual days so let me take some informal things first, and then, I'll mention the others. In schools, there are casual dress days. There are days when it's a football game and so everybody wears game day shirts or your dress is casual. In this position, you don't dress casual. You are always viewed as you're on the job, and you can't ever tell who the parent or who somebody is going to drop by the office, and so you are always in the middle of things, so to say let go of past things, you have to realize you're always a deputy superintendent. You are not ever one of the boys.

Realizing she now has middle power in the disintegration-reintegration phase, Pearl shared an experience commanding the principals to make a final decision about schedules. Pearl stated:

I said this is what I'm taking to the superintendent, this is what we're going with, and understand we're going to live with this for the next four years, because we're not changing kid's schedules again. The kids who are freshmen will graduate with this. When I say I made the decision, I made the decision to recommend to the board, to the superintendent and the board. With us, the board is the final decision maker, but among the principals I said this is the way we're going to go. You all voted, I've listened to you rant and rave for over a year. This went on for a year,

and I said it's time to make a decision. 'We need to talk.' No, we're not going to talk anymore. We're going to vote today, and whatever we decide, we're going that way. They said, 'We're short a person, can we call?' We're not calling anybody and voting right now.

Like Pearl, Shirley described her experiences letting go of past ways. Shirley stated:

Going from making the paradigm shift where you're doing all your planning and throwing all of your energy into one school building and then up here it's a system wide focus. It's a district wide focus. Yeah, I had to make that mental leap in the ways that I prepared for things and my planning and implementation of various things. You have so much to consider at the district level than just in your school building, thought of a lot more, planned a lot more, thought a lot more pre-planning.

When asked whether she had middle power, Shirley stated, "I think so." Discussing her power to make decisions, Shirley stated:

I'm able to make a lot of decisions on my own regarding instruction and curriculum. I say on my own but that comes from my years of collaborating with the superintendent and knowing and understanding his expectations. Then I'm able to make my own decisions. I'm able to make a lot of financial decisions within my budget within my programs.

Like Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie described her experiences letting go of past ways. Kerrie discussed when she realized that she was now assistant superintendent, she also realized

she had power. She let go of no longer having power and realized she now had power as assistant superintendent. Kerrie stated:

It was a big learning curve. You train yourself on how to communicate, how to talk to people, articulate things in the way you want them communicated, choosing the right words, conducting yourself in a business matter, and also in an empathetic manner that you are genuinely listening instead of just sitting across the big desk and exhibiting the power. They know you're going to make a decision, but they also know you're part of the team. You know it took me the first because I worked with every principal under me and there's uncomfortable times when you have to order or reprimand, it took me a little bit of you never get comfortable with it but you know when to exert it.

The transformation-restabilization passage encompasses competence and confidence. The female assistant superintendents have become more competent and confident as a result of passing through the other passages. They also have learned new approaches to problem-solving and decision making as well as the importance of reflection. Describing how she is now more competent and confident realizing that she cannot please everyone, Pearl shared:

I think I have gotten at peace with that I can't solve all the problems. I've done some soul searching I guess I would say, and realized that you can't please everyone. You can try to do the very best you can, do what is right for children and then you have to move on.

In regards to her approaches to problem-solving and decision making, Pearl shared she has learned to not take it personal. Pearl stated:

It's not personal. You have to say, I understand you don't like what I've said, but it's not personal. I had one principals meeting yesterday with seven of my schools, and then I had seven in the afternoon and I had six in the morning, so I had thirteen schools that I met with yesterday. You have to say to them, they didn't like one of the things we told them we were going to do, and their comment is, 'This isn't fair; we don't like this decision,' and I said, 'I understand, but it's a sound financial decision. We can't afford financially to do something different. You've got to understand that the humane thing is what we all want to do, but when it starts costing us thousands of dollars a day, we've got to go another way.' You just have to sometimes say, 'It's not personal, we've got to do what's sound financially and sound educationally.' This involves special programs, and we were getting lots of children that need aides, and we just said, 'Look we can't take everybody's problems. We can't afford it,' so that's what we had to say.

She further shared reflection is important to be able to move forward. Pearl shared:

You always got to go back and look. You can't beat yourself up. You need to go back and reflect that did I do the right thing for the right reasons. If you didn't, then you try to change in the future, but if you did make the decision for the right reason, and it was based on sound data, then you let it go and move on.

Describing how she is now more competent and confident, Shirley shared, "I know my job. I know it well and I think I perform it well. That gives you confidence in what you're



doing. I've become more competent in other areas as well.” Reflecting on things she has done to become more confident and competent, she shared:

I study. I read a lot. If there's an issue or something we have going on in our district, I read a lot of professional journals, I read books. Before we implement things, I research how effective they've been, what we might need to do different in our implementation. I think that's made me more competent. I don't just accept what I'm told, I want to dig and see evidence for myself.

Shirley also shared she has learned approaches to problem-solving and decision making. Stating the importance of enforcing rules, Shirley stated:

I'm a rules follower. If that's the rule I can separate those kinds of emotions from my decision making. Now, there's another part of it too for me. My child is a student in this school system. I want every teacher to be their best every day for kids.

Shirley added that she has learned she needs buy-in to implement new initiatives. Shirley shared:

I've just learned, one big one especially as it applies to new initiatives and implementations, the people that it's going to affect directly need to be involved in that decision-making process early on. You need buy in from those people who are going to be directly affected instead of them feeling as though it's been forced upon them. They respond a lot better and it goes so much better when they feel that they've had a say so or their opinions have been respected and input has been sought. I've learned to do more of that. It takes little longer and I'm always on a

schedule to get things done. It takes a little longer but having input from the end user so to speak is important to get that early.

Shirley further shared reflection is important as it can alleviate stress. Shirley shared:

Reflection is big. It's something that I think all educators need to practice to be really reflective in their thinking. Then if they feel that a decision was made that might not be best after reflecting upon it be willing to make the change if that's what's needed. How would I deal with emotional distress? I can pretty much be at peace.

Describing how she is now more competent and confident, Kerrie shared:

I understand the process. I understand funding. I understand the operational function of the programs. I understand how we deal with different issues that arise. I understand what a board's role is, what a board member actually does. I understand the functions of the CSFO really the ends and outs of what our role is, what a district does, how enrollment affects us all, these outlying factors affect a school district, what does it mean for four special education kids to move in who have high needs that you don't have funding for. How is that going to impact your funding and personnel? How's that lawsuit going to impact you? What is that going to require for you to do?

Kerrie also shared she has learned approaches to problem-solving and decision making.

Thinking daily about how she addresses issues, Kerrie stated:

I do this daily. I will go back and revisit, and if there is an issue with a principal that didn't end the way I wanted it to end, I'll go back and revisit it the next day. I'll call the principal and say, 'You know what, this would have been a better way for me to say this to you because I don't have a good feeling about it. I know the way that conversation was left is going to affect the rest of the week so we need to take care of it.' Even though the result is going to be the same, the relationship is going to be better. The decision will stay the same, but the relationship will be better. The understanding could have been better.

Kerrie further shared reflection is so important. Kerrie shared:

I think reflection is a very appropriate term to use and having made mistakes you learn from mistakes you're very cautious you're very intentional you're very selective with language a lot of times you know the way I react to some things is going to cause somebody else to react negatively how is that going to be trickled down to everyone else under me so I have to set the example a lot of times it is that processing before we speak it is that internal discipline where I've got a million things to do but you want to take up 30 minutes of my time I can't just rush that person out of my office. I'm involved in it. I need to reflect whether it's something solely individual or something I was a part of. I need to reflect and have that feedback that I am confident and that things were right and that we did the best we could.

**Challenges.** Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie experienced challenges while in middle space leadership. The challenges consisted of experiencing vertical or lateral pressure or

vertical and lateral pressure. Vertical pressure results from pressure working between upper management and lower level workers whereas lateral pressure results from pressure working between administrators and teachers and staff, students, and parents.

Pearl experienced both vertical and lateral pressure. When describing the pressure she feels making decisions between upper management and lower level workers, Pearl described making a decision about not hiring extra units for a principal. Remembering a past conversation with a principal, Pearl described her experience stating:

You always have pressure. You have pressure from, I'll give you an example would be when we assign teacher units. You have pressure from your principal saying, 'You know I'm poor pitiful, I need this extra teacher unit. I need two more units here,' and you go, 'This is what you earned. You've been given extra units here. I can't give you every one of your needs.' 'But, I'm your favorite school.' 'No, I don't have favorites. I try to be fair.' 'You know mine is the highest need.' 'No, I don't know that. I understand you think that, and I appreciate you fighting for your school, but we've got to be fair to everybody.'

Additionally, Pearl described the lateral pressure she experienced working in the middle space between administrators and parents. Recalling past conversations about pressures she experienced when being asked to overturn a discipline decision or being asked to hire people who have been released from their jobs, Pearl recalled:

You'll get the mayor calling you or the minister calls or you'll get a board member will call and say, 'His second sister is married to this person,' and you go, 'Okay.'

'Do you think you could cut him a break?' 'No, ma'am I can't. This is what the code of conduct says, this is what I've got to do.' This person is the mayor's daughter's sister; we really need to find him a job. They've been released, I can't give them another job. You get those pressures every day.

Unlike Pearl, Shirley only experienced lateral pressure. Shirley felt she did not experience vertical pressure because her relationship with the principals. Shirley explained there is an understanding of respect that exists between her and the principals. Stating that the principals will call her and talk to her about something the superintendent has mandated. Not equating that to pressure, Shirley stated:

They [principals] will, but it's not pressure for me because I think in the professional relationships that I have with other administrators they know not to box me in. You know what I'm saying? I think our relationships are respectful enough to where I wouldn't put them in a stressful situation and I don't do well when somebody tries to put me in that little box either. Them calling and venting is one thing, but to exert pressure on me to exert pressure on him we don't really have that. In their venting if they have a valid argument, I'm taking that in, I'm listening to them and I'm talking to him about it. I just consider that part of what we do.

Shirley did experience lateral pressure with parents due to her enforcement of the rules. Recalling the pressure she felt regarding an attendance issue with parents, Shirley explained:

I have a kid for example who checks out one day at the end of the day some point after two thirty that didn't receive perfect attendance. I'm a rules follower. Parents came up here. Grandparents came here back and forth emailing and calling and this, it's personal. I'm a rules follower, and our policy says no check outs. I don't care if it was two forty-five; this is our policy. My heart broke for them because it was a good family, good kids, but once you bend the rules, you need to be prepared to always do that. I'm big on policies and procedures and following those if they've been established.

Like Pearl and Shirley, Kerrie also experienced pressure. Experiencing both vertical and lateral pressure, Kerrie described her experiences. Describing her experiences stating that she absolutely feels vertical pressure when she has to make personnel decisions mandated by the superintendent, Kerrie divulged, "Absolutely, I mean teachers are powerful people. Parents are very powerful people. You know you have a, there's nothing worse than you're making a personnel decision, and the people across the table from you are in tears." Kerrie further stated that she also experiences lateral pressure. Describing that she indeed experienced lateral pressure, Kerrie described her pressures working between administrators and parents, teachers, and students as uncomfortable stating:

I have, yes, from the extent of saying this is why your child was in the yearbook as an honor graduate but he didn't make honor graduate so no you're not going to walk across the stage to I'm sorry but you're receiving a non-retained slip so we're going to have to put you on leave those are uncomfortable situations and

because more than likely I'm going to know this person beyond the extent of being my employee.

Table 11

*Novice Female Assistant Superintendents' Experiences as Middle Space Leaders*

Theme	Tessie	Vanessa	Jasmine
Location	"We have a superintendent who obviously is CEO of the organization, and then, I would be second in command in the organization."	"I'm right below the superintendent."	"Our superintendent would be our primary leader and then we have another assistant superintendent who oversees different departments so he and I are together."
Function	"My primary responsibilities are in curriculum and instruction."	"I am the assistant superintendent for human resources."	"I am the special education coordinator and the federal programs director."
Tasks	"Yes, if the superintendent gives them."	"Yes, I take orders every day. We get our marching orders from the superintendent."	"When she tells us to do something, we do it."
Roles	"We definitely look inside and outside [the organization for data to improve the organization]."	"Yes, I'm one of the data collectors for our cabinet."	"Getting ideas as to what other systems do that we may be able to use or vary a little bit to work for our students, so yes, I do that a great deal."
Relationships	"Teachers, principals, other people in the position in other districts, all of that's really important."	"The relationships that I've had with people have all helped me fulfill the role of this position."	"The relationships with the teachers, parents, etc. I don't think success could happen."
Passages	"Reflection is so, so important. It's the key to growing."	"I'm very reflective in nature."	"I think it's important for growth."
Challenges	"I think the hard thing is sometimes I can't explain to people why decisions were made."	"Sometimes the pressure comes because I am the middle man. Being in that middle space, sometimes, is a very hard place to be in."	"Sometimes there are those who have one answer to things and when a different answer is given, it's not received in the most positive way."

Table 12

*Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents' Experiences as Middle Space Leaders*

Theme	Pearl	Shirley	Kerrie
Location	"I answer only to the superintendent and the board."	"I'm number two behind the superintendent obviously senior level administration with one level on the organizational chart above me and that's the office of the superintendent."	"I am directly under the superintendent and I work closely with the CSFO as well. I am, guess you would say, second in command."
Function	"I directly supervise staffs and principals of those 26 schools [and] supervise student services, which handles a lot of our discipline problems, and I supervise the IT department."	"My duties are federal programs and curriculum."	"I am the director of federal programs, technology, curriculum, administrators."
Tasks	"The only times he [superintendent would give orders] would be when he would tell us we need to meet with our principals and share some information or gather some information."	"There are times that the superintendent may issue a directive. You just have your marching orders and you have to do what is asked of you."	"The person I would take orders from would either be the chairman of the board or either the superintendent."
Roles	"If you're asking do we seek information or outside sources for information, yes."	"I survey teachers as well as administrators on professional development needs, which is also when I start looking outside of the district; I'm looking at what the trends are."	When asked do you search for information and data to drive decisions to help improve the organization, she responded, "We do."
Relationships	"If you don't build relationships, you can't survive."	"They're [relationships] are all important."	"Without the relationships with the teachers, parents, etc. I don't think success could happen."
Passages	"You need to go back and reflect that did I do the right thing for the right reasons."	"Reflection is big."	"I need to reflect and have that feedback that I am confident and that things were right and that we did the best we could."
Challenges	"You get those pressures every day."	"My heart broke for them because it was a good family, good kids."	"Those are uncomfortable situations."



## **Cross Case Analysis**

After conducting a with-in case analysis, the researcher conducted a cross case analysis of themes to explore both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents' concept of middle space leadership. Additionally, the researcher analyzed both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents' cases to answer each research question. The researcher analyzed the cases to be able to compare the cases across the research questions. Table 13 illustrated the themes that were the result of conducting a cross case analysis across both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents.

**Central question.** How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders?

**Sub-questions.** In order to answer the central research question, the following sub-questions were asked of the participants:

1. What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
2. What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
3. How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?
4. Are there differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and if so, what are the differences?

**Cross case themes for research sub-question 1A: challenges obtaining their position.** Research question 1A was the following: What challenges do female assistant

superintendents describe in obtaining their position? After thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts, both groups shared they experienced no challenges obtaining their positions.

***Description of cross case theme 1A: no challenges.*** Research question 1A was the following: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining their position? This research question was related to the challenges female assistant superintendents described obtaining their positions. Conducting the cross case analysis with novice and female assistant superintendents, the researcher found one common theme which described the challenges female assistant superintendents described in obtaining their position. The cross case analysis revealed that both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared one theme in common. Both groups described they did not experience any challenges obtaining their position. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

**Cross case themes for research sub-question 1B: challenges sustaining their position.** Research question 1B was the following: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in sustaining their position? After thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts, both groups shared they experienced challenges sustaining their position as female assistant superintendents. A total of four themes emerged after thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts that are shared across the novice and veteran female assistant superintendent cases. One theme was an outlier when comparing the cases. The outlier was that the novice assistant superintendents missed student interaction. This theme was not shared among veteran female assistant superintendents.

***Description of cross case theme 1: opinions respected but not acted upon.*** Both groups shared their experiences revealing their feelings about their opinions were respected but not acted upon. Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared they felt their superintendent respected their suggestions, recommendations, or decisions although they may not have been acted upon. Although this was perceived as a challenge, both groups realized they were not the final say and accepted their superintendent's final decision. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 2: limited in final decision making.*** Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared a challenge they experienced was they were limited in final decision making. Both groups realized the superintendent was the final say and made the final decisions although they were given some decision-making power. Across both cases, it was observed both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents had some sole decision making power. Their decision-making power was limited because the superintendent made the final decisions. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 3: demanding job.*** Both groups shared their job was demanding. Due to the number of responsibilities and tasks for which they were responsible, they shared experiences that reflect feeling of being overwhelmed. Tessie described "the breadth of things," Vanessa shared "everybody wants something now," and Jasmine shared "there's constantly [demands]." Like the novice female assistant superintendents, Pearl shared "demanding of your time," Shirley revealed, "sheer volume of work," and Kerrie elaborated on there's "never a dull moment." Both groups shared

they were responsible for numerous responsibilities. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 4: change in relationships.*** Both groups shared their relationships had to change as a result of their positions. Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared experiences of how their relationships had changed. Tessie described it as “purposefully pulled back,” Vanessa shared it as “separation,” and Jasmine referred to it as “versus.” Like the novice female assistant superintendents, veteran female assistant superintendents described their changing relationships. Pearl described it as “lonely,” Shirley referred to it as “lines,” and Kerrie described it as “parameters.” Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

**Cross case themes for research sub-question 2A: facilitating factors obtaining their position.** Research question 2A was the following: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining their positions? After thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts, both groups shared facilitating factors helped them obtain their position as female assistant superintendents. A total of five themes emerged after thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts that are shared across the novice and veteran female assistant superintendent cases. Three themes were outliers when comparing the cases. The outliers were the novice assistant superintendents were groomed for advancement, and they trusted their informal mentor. These themes were not shared among veteran female assistant superintendents. The last outlier was veteran assistant superintendents participated in direct leadership

experience as teachers. This theme was not shared among novice female assistant superintendents.

***Description of cross case theme 1: prepared by education and experience.*** Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents were prepared by education and experience. Both groups shared their education and experience as a facilitating factor obtaining their position. They believed their education and experience prepared them for the assistant superintendency. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 2: promoted within.*** Both groups shared they were promoted from within the organization. Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared they had held various positions in the organization by being promoted from within the organization. Both groups had held positions in their districts prior to becoming assistant superintendents. Both groups shared advancing was not a problem due to already being familiar with the organization. Neither group had to learn the organization after becoming assistant superintendents. Additionally, both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared they felt their work ethic was known in their districts. Both groups cited their superintendent's awareness of their work ethic as a facilitating factor obtaining the assistant superintendency. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 3: received mentoring.*** Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared receiving mentoring was a facilitating factor helping them obtain the assistant superintendency. They all felt that mentoring helped equip them with what they needed to be assistant superintendents. In other words, they

all felt mentoring prepared them to obtain the assistant superintendency. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

*Description of cross case theme 4: networked effectively.* Both groups described their ability to network effectively as a facilitating factor to obtain their position as assistant superintendent. Both veteran and novice female assistant superintendents shared they were all previously known by the hiring superintendent in some capacity. Both groups revealed they knew the hiring superintendent prior to being hired as assistant superintendent. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

*Description of cross case theme 5: embraced career change.* Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared they were ready for a career change. All female assistant superintendents wanted to work in a different role. They desired change in regards to their prior jobs in the districts. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

**Cross case themes for research sub-question 2B: facilitating factors sustaining their position.** Research question 2B was the following: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in sustaining their positions? After thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts, both groups shared facilitating factors helped them sustain their position as female assistant superintendents. A total of three themes emerged after thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts that are shared across both the novice and veteran female assistant superintendent cases. Three themes were outliers when comparing the cases. One outlier was the novice assistant superintendents valued mentoring. This theme was not shared among veteran

female assistant superintendents. The last outliers were the veteran assistant superintendents were committed to mentoring others and they were fulfilled through work. These themes were not shared among novice female assistant superintendents.

***Description of cross case theme 1: acquired skills.*** Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared acquiring skills is a facilitating factor that helped them sustain their job as assistant superintendent. Both groups shared they possessed effective communication skills. These effective communication skills consisted of the ability to listen and plan. Also, both groups shared they possessed the ability to be trustworthy. They were trusted by their superintendents and trusted as well by others. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 2: maintained positive relationships.*** Both groups revealed maintaining positive relationships as a facilitating factor that helped them sustain their position as assistant superintendent. Both novice and veteran assistant superintendents identified relationships needed to sustain their positions. They also engaged in shared leadership relationships with their superintendents. Both groups revealed these relationships were pertinent to their success as assistant superintendents. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 3: involved in networking.*** Both novice and veteran assistant superintendent groups shared their involvement in networking was a facilitating factor sustaining their positions as assistant superintendents. They all believed building networks was essential to their success as assistant superintendent. They attribute their ability to succeeding in their role to the networks they have been able to form while acting as assistant superintendent. They also shared their participation in

organizations have helped them maintain their involvement in networks. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

**Cross case themes for research sub-question 3: experiences as middle space leaders.** Research question 3 was the following: How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space? After thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts, both groups shared experiences that aligned with the characteristics of middle space leadership. A total of seven themes emerged after thoroughly reading both novice and veteran female assistant superintendent transcripts that are shared across both the novice and veteran female assistant superintendent cases.

*Description of cross case theme 1: location.* Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared experiences that reflect their location in middle space leadership. They were all located in a position that is considered middle space which is between upper management and lower level workers. They all shared they reported to their superintendent. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

*Description of cross case theme 2: function.* Both groups shared experiences that reflect their function in middle space leadership. Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared experiences that show they act as both managers and system integrators. As managers, they oversee their area or areas of responsibility. Functioning as system integrators, they work with peers and colleagues to keep things in perspective and maintain balance within the organization between upper management and



lower level workers. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 3: tasks.*** Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared their experiences of acting as subordinates, superiors, equals, and delegators and doers. Acting as subordinates, both groups shared they take orders and requests from their superiors. Both novice and veteran groups shared their experiences acting as superiors by giving orders. Additionally, both groups also shared their experiences acting as an equal by being a peer or colleague. Lastly, both groups shared their experiences in the middle space acting as a delegator and doer by assigning and completing tasks. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 4: roles.*** Both groups shared their experiences reflecting their roles as middle space leaders. They shared experiences in the middle space reflecting their roles as bridgers, buffers, and boundary spanners. As bridgers, both groups work to bridge upper management with lower level workers. The novice and veteran assistant superintendents also shared their experiences acting as a buffer serving as a protector of the organization, preventing uproars in the organization. Additionally, both groups shared their experiences acting as a boundary spanner searching for information and data to improve the organization. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 5: relationships.*** Both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents shared experiences of their relationships in the middle space. They all shared experiences about relationships that were pertinent in middle space

leadership. Both groups shared their experiences regarding their relationships with peers and colleagues, upper management, lower level workers, and mentors. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case theme 6: passages.*** As middle space leaders, both groups shared experiences that show they passed through a series of passages while transitioning to the assistant superintendency. Passages were entry-exit, immersion-emersion, disintegration-reintegration, and transformation-restabilization. During entry-exit, assistant superintendents described the transition of entering the new role of being in middle space while exiting out of their prior role. Entry-exit involves preparing to become assistant superintendent. Immersion-emersion described assistant superintendents realizing the shocks and surprises being immersed in this middle space. Disintegration-reintegration described finding new ways to act in the new role that leads to succeeding in the middle space which involves acknowledging their middle power to lighten upper management's responsibilities. Transformation-restabilization described the feelings of competence and confidence in successfully performing their job. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

***Description of cross case Theme 7: challenges.*** Both female assistant superintendent groups shared they experienced challenges while in middle space leadership. The challenges consisted of experiencing vertical or lateral pressure or vertical and lateral pressure. Vertical pressure results from pressure working between upper management and lower level workers whereas lateral pressure results from pressure working between administrators and teachers and staff, students, and parents. Table 13 lists this theme as a cross case theme for research question 1A.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 encompassed a detailed analysis of the findings conducted for this study on female assistant superintendents in middle space leadership. This detailed account of findings is encompassed with thick, rich description in the form of quotes highlighting the experiences of female assistant superintendents as middle space leaders. Providing thick, rich description and quotations, the researcher sought to present the findings that reflected the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents in middle space leadership in urban, suburban, and rural school districts. In addition to providing thick, rich description of narrative accounts of both novice and veteran assistant superintendents, the researcher also utilized observations and other documents to provide in-depth, detailed analysis and accounts of the both cases. Using illustrative quotes, the researcher answered sub-questions to provide a detailed analysis of with-in case analysis. The researcher then conducted a cross-case analysis to answer the research questions on the experiences of female assistant superintendents. The cross-case analysis presented findings on the challenges in obtaining and sustaining the position, facilitating factors on obtaining and sustaining their position, and the description of experiences in sustaining their position in middle space.

Table 13

*Cross Case Analysis of Themes for Research Questions 1-3: Novice and Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Novice Themes</b>	<b>Veteran Themes</b>
Research Question 1a: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining their position?	No Challenges	No Challenges
Research Question 1b: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in sustaining their position?	Opinions Respected but Not Acted Upon Limited in Final Decision Making Demanding Job Change in Relationships	Opinions Respected but Not Acted Upon Limited in Final Decision Making Demanding Job Change in Relationships
Research Question 2a: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining their positions?	Prepared by Education and Experience Promoted Within Received Mentoring Networked Effectively Embraced Career Change	Prepared by Education and Experience Promoted Within Received Mentoring Networked Effectively Embraced Career Change
Research Question 2b: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in sustaining their positions?	Acquired Skills Maintained Positive Relationships Involved in Networking	Acquired Skills Maintained Positive Relationships Involved in Networking
Research Question 3: How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?	Location Tasks Roles Relationships Passages Challenges	Location Tasks Roles Relationships Passages Challenges

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to describe the lived experiences of both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents. The central research question for the study was: How do female assistant superintendents in school districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders?

The researcher utilized qualitative methodology to explore the essence of middle space leadership by conducting a multiple case study to explore female assistant superintendents' experiences in obtaining and sustaining their positions in middle space leadership. The findings were reported in Chapter 4, and this chapter will include a discussion of middle space leadership, a summary of findings and interpretations, limitations, implications and recommendations for future research, overall significance, and conclusion.

### **Literature Review Revisited**

Middle space leadership was the conceptual framework for this study. The middle space leader works between upper management and lower level workers. As middle space leaders, female assistant superintendents work between the superintendent and other workers. For this study's literature review, the researcher focused on the role of the central office, female superintendents, assistant superintendents of schools, and middle space leadership as the conceptual framework.

Immersed in middle space leadership, female assistant superintendents work in middle management positions in the central offices of local education agencies. The characteristics of middle space leadership include location, tasks, roles, relationships, passages, and challenges. Middle space leaders are located in middle space in an area between upper management and lower level workers (Armstrong, 2009; Oshry, 1993). Their tasks consist of acting as a subordinate, superior, equal, and delegator and doer (Uyterhoeven, 1989). Additionally, middle space leaders have roles that consist of being a bridger, buffer, and boundary spanner (Armstrong, 2010; Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Furthermore, middle space leaders maintain key relationships with peers and colleagues, upper management, lower level workers, and mentoring relationships. Middle space leadership is also representative of “passages” (Armstrong, 2009, p.1) as middle space leaders pass through these stages as they transition into the middle space leadership role. Lastly, middle space leaders experience challenges that consist of lateral pressure, vertical pressure, or a combination of vertical and lateral pressure (Oshry, 1993).

While the assistant superintendency is a central office position, central office plays a vital role in the leadership of school districts and accountability by functioning as a learning organization, establishing assistance relationships, and serving as a boundary spanner. Central office operates as a learning organization by being grounded in organizational learning focusing on improving the overall organization. By establishing assistance relationships, central office supports principals by equipping principals with tools they need to lead schools effectively. Serving as a boundary spanner, central office promotes opportunities of growth for principals by finding and locating information and data and then incorporating it and making sense of how to use it.

The position of female assistant superintendent can be a pathway to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). In this decade, the superintendency is occupied by more women than in the past. In fact, 23 percent of superintendents were women as of 2012 (Wallace, 2015), compared to 2.8 percent being female superintendents in 1989 (McCabe, 2001). Although female superintendents are more prevalent, they experience challenges that consist of cultural and political barriers and lack of access to formal mentoring programs. Cultural barriers consist of cultural assumptions that men are better, more effective leaders (DiCanio et al., 2016; Sherman et al., 2008). Men are portrayed as better disciplinarians and better communicators with the board when handling overall politics (DiCanio et al., 2016) which makes female career advancement more complicated (Sherman et al., 2008). Furthermore, women experience a domestic barrier which consists of being caretakers of the children while men are leaders and administrators (DiCanio et al., 2016; Washington, Miller, & Fiene, 2007). Family and childcare responsibilities can be a barrier for women in administration (Shakeshaft, 1985; Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). In addition to the family cultural barrier, the lack of women mentors also serves as another cultural boundary (Sherman et al. 2008) as there is a shortage of available mentors for female administrators (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1985; Sherman et al., 2008) Political barriers may include the “good ole boy buddy system” (Polka, et al., 2008; Sherman et al., 2008) which is “an invisible network of sponsorship whereby older professionals groom younger versions of themselves for leadership positions” (McGee, 2010, p. 14) and the “professional victim syndrome” (Polka et al., 2008) in which female assistant superintendents suffer as a result of making decisions that are not politically popular. Although faced with cultural and

political challenges, female superintendents must learn to be resilient by practicing five dispositions of challenge, commitment, control, creativity, and caring (Polka et al., 2008) and making good decisions, learning from mistakes, having a supportive network, and remaining positive and optimistic even when faced with adversity (Reed & Patterson, 2007).

The assistant superintendency comes with roles and responsibilities, usually assigned by the superintendent. Although more women work as assistant superintendents in local education agencies' central offices than in past decades, they have mentoring needs that consist of developing themselves as individuals and promoting productive relationships with others (Sherman et al., 2008). Female assistant superintendents are immersed in middle space leadership as middle managers.

### **Research Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis**

The research study was designed using qualitative methodology to explore the phenomenon of female assistant superintendents' experiences in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. Novice and veteran female assistant superintendents comprised the two cases that were used to explore middle space leadership. Utilizing the *2015-2016 State Department of Education Directory*, the researcher identified thirty female assistant superintendents. The researcher contacted the local education agencies' secretaries to confirm that the female assistant superintendents still worked at the local education agencies and to inquire of their years in the position. The researcher then contacted each female assistant superintendent using an approved email invitation. A total of eight female assistant superintendents responded to the email. Of the eight assistant superintendents who responded, six were current assistant



superintendents. Three assistant superintendents were novice female assistant superintendents and three were veteran female assistant superintendents located in various areas of the state and in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Utilizing research from the literature, the researcher developed an interview protocol that allowed the female assistant superintendents to share their experiences as middle space leaders. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by Rev.com. Interviews took place in each participant's office which allowed the researcher to take field notes. After interviews were transcribed, the researcher used a method referred to as coding to analyze the data. According to Scwandt (2007) coding allows the researcher to categorize data into segments. After grouping information into codes, the researcher looked for emerging themes. The researcher analyzed patterns of themes in accordance with answering the research questions. Themes were analyzed within the cases and across the cases.

Lastly, the researcher achieved verification and validity by conducting member checks, collecting multiple data sources to achieve triangulation, and bracketing any personal thoughts and feelings. Identifying themes, the researcher conducted a with-in case analysis followed by a cross-case analysis to answer the sub-questions that would describe novice and veteran female assistant superintendents' experiences as middle space leaders. A discussion of the findings will follow this section.

### **Summary of Findings and Interpretations**

This section is a summary of the findings and interpretations of the qualitative data used to answer the central research question and the sub-questions. The central research question of this study was: How do female assistant superintendents in school

districts describe their experiences obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders? The sub-questions were:

1. What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining and sustaining their position?
2. What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents describe assisted them in obtaining and sustaining their positions?
3. How do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space?
4. Are there differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and if so, what are the differences?

The findings from research questions one through three addressed the central research question. The findings will be discussed from the perceptions of two cases: novice and veteran female assistant superintendents. The last sub-question was created to determine whether differences existed between novice and veteran female assistant superintendents.

### **Research Question One: Challenges**

**RQ 1A: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in obtaining their position?** The findings revealed that female assistant superintendents shared they did not experience challenges in obtaining their positions. When asked whether they faced any challenges when obtaining the assistant superintendency, Tessie, Jasmine, and Kerrie stated, “No.” Similarly, Shirley replied, “I can’t think of any major challenge.” This was a surprise finding because the researcher expected there to be challenges. They could have felt they did not experience any challenges because they received the first assistant superintendent position for which they applied.

The findings reflected female assistant superintendents did not experience any challenges for three reasons. First, they all shared they knew the hiring superintendent. Pearl stated, “Yes, he was my supervisor. He was the superintendent when I was principal at the school.” Because Tessie, Vanessa, Jasmine, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all knew their hiring superintendent, this served as an advantage to them. By using their networks to their advantage to obtain this position, it seemed these females figured it out. The “old girl/boy network” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 54) was discussed in the research literature so this does support the existence of this networking system. It appeared they were groomed into those positions or were “advantaged applicants” (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999, p. 5). Both Vanessa and Jasmine shared their former assistant superintendents also groomed them into the position. Vanessa stated, “When I was a teacher she would actually have me doing things that I would say, ‘Why are you asking me do that?’ She just kept saying ‘I see you here.’” In fact, all six participants both novice and veteran assistant superintendents shared they advanced within their districts. The researcher speculated when someone worked in the district, the superintendent was able to see their work ethic, their level of responsibility that they took, their follow-through on commitments, and their level of dedication to the success of the organization. Also, this gave them the opportunity to enter the superintendent’s circle of trust which may be needed to advance to the assistant superintendency.

Next, they all shared that they were encouraged to apply for the position. When reminiscing about her relationship with her former assistant superintendent, Vanessa revealed, “As she [former assistant superintendent] was getting ready to leave, she said, ‘You know you need to apply for my position.’ She constantly encouraged me. I think I

learned so much from her. I think that's what helped me get this job." Vanessa, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie disclosed that they were all approached by their informal mentors who worked in the district or by the superintendent to apply for the assistant superintendency. Both Tessie and Jasmine revealed their previous former assistant superintendents shared with them that they were retiring. This means that the assistant superintendents all were tapped either by their superintendent or by their previous assistant superintendent to be next in line for the position. They had been pre-picked to fill the position because their mentors or superintendents saw potential in them.

Lastly, they were promoted from within the organization. Tessie, Vanessa, Jasmine, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all stated they were familiar with the organization prior to their hire as assistant superintendent because they worked in the district before becoming assistant superintendents. Shirley stated, "I already pretty well knew the organization having come through it through high school." The researcher speculated that the superintendent more than likely saw their abilities to lead and complete tasks. This enabled the superintendent to have a preview of how they could assist in leading the district. The superintendent could have observed their potential when they served on committees or completed other tasks. Superintendents look to appoint candidates with potential to serve on their administrative teams.

The finding from Research Question 1A was affirmed in the research literature in several places. For example, Gupton and Slick (1996) stated that it is not uncommon for female assistant superintendents to have secured their position via networks or sponsors. Grogan (1996) found a large number of female administrators knew their hiring male superintendents prior to receiving their positions. Additionally, Brunner and Grogan

(2007) posited the “old girl/boy network” (p. 54) is the reason administrators obtain central office promotions and over half of assistant superintendents got their job via the “good old boy/girl network.” Brunner and Grogan (2007) added the majority of assistant superintendents had male mentors who helped them obtain the assistant superintendency. Lastly, Kowalski and Stouder (1999) referred to assistant superintendents who had mentors help them obtain the assistant superintendency as “advantaged applicants” (p. 5).

Table 14 summarizes the cross case themes of research question 1A.

Table 14

*Summary of Cross Case Themes for Challenges Obtaining Their Position*

Theme	Novice Female Assistant Superintendents	Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents
No Challenges	When asked did she face any challenges when obtaining this position, Jasmine stated, “No, I don't think so.”	Kerrie stated, “There were no challenges I faced for this position.”
They experienced no challenges because they knew the Hiring Superintendent	Jasmine responded, “He was my superintendent. He had been a former high school principal who was actually my teacher when I was in high school.”	Pearl espoused, “Yes, he was my supervisor. He was the superintendent when I was principal at the school.”
They experienced no challenges because they were encouraged to Apply	Vanessa revealed, “As she [former assistant superintendent] was getting ready to leave, she said, ‘You know you need to apply for my position.’ She constantly encouraged me. I think I learned so much from her. I think that’s what helped me get this job.”	Kerrie added “I was approached by my superintendent and we talked about the responsibilities and what that title looked like what my responsibilities would be, how we wanted our office to operate.”
They experienced no challenges because they were Promoted from Within the Organization	Vanessa posited, “I’ve been in the district for a long time, so I know most of the people in this district.... I’ve grown up in this system professionally.”	Shirley affirmed, “I already pretty well knew the organization having come through it through high school.”

**RQ 1B: What challenges do female assistant superintendents describe in sustaining their position?** The findings revealed five challenges female assistant superintendents described in sustaining their position. First, they described that their opinions were respected but not always acted upon. Tessie stated, “If he [superintendent] says, ‘No, we’re going to go a different route,’ I say, ‘Okay, that works for me.’ I mean it doesn’t have to be my way.” They had power that had limits; thus, they had to understand that the superintendent made decisions that may not have reflected their desires. The researcher deduced that this is because they knew they worked below the superintendent. The researcher has also found that to be a challenge in her position. Being in the middle space means one has a certain level of authority but not all of it, and so the middle space leader has to constantly balance the varying role authority. This finding is affirmed in the research literature. Armstrong (2009) found middle managers did not have the power they thought; instead, they had “so-called power” (p. 88) due to having decisions often overturned by their superiors.

In addition to having their opinions respected but not always accepted, female assistant superintendents also experienced being limited in their final decision making. Assistant superintendents understood they could “somewhat” make final decisions in their areas. Jasmine explained her restrictive decision-making stating, “All of the special education decisions fall on me. Those big decisions, I would never make without consulting.” Kerrie shared, “Well, the final decision is his [superintendent’s] and if it’s something that’s going to have to be something that I don’t feel like I have the authority to make that decision, I’m going to take it to him.” This meant that although assistant superintendents can make some decisions, they knew their decision-making had limits

and boundaries. In her position as a middle space leader, the researcher has also found this to be a challenge as she felt she could make some final decisions in her areas of responsibility but she knew this came with restrictions. If she was making a big decision in her area, then she could not make the final decision on her own; in other words, some decisions required superintendent's approval. This finding aligned with the research literature. Cawthorne (2010) stated middle managers have a certain degree of influence when it comes to decision making. Additionally, Armstrong (2010) found middle managers never have final decision making power.

The third challenge for assistant superintendents in sustaining their positions as middle space leaders was that they experienced a demanding job. Jasmine stated, "Yes, I do think it is [demanding]. There's constantly decisions, plans, paperwork, deadlines, meetings that have to be completed in a timely manner." Female assistant superintendents face the reality of having numerous demands placed on them. The researcher has also found in her position as a middle space leader that these feelings of the job being demanding are due to the large mountain of tasks and responsibilities she is faced with completing daily. The researcher has also experienced this. Due to numerous responsibilities assigned by her superintendent and her desire to please her superintendent, she willingly takes on whatever her superintendent asks her to complete, although she may feel overwhelmed. Evident in the research literature, Gleeson and Knights (2008) found middle managers wear many hats and the middle manager's role is a complex one. Also Armstrong (2009) found that middle managers' jobs are characterized by several demands and increasing workloads. Furthermore, Giles (2015)

and Thomas-Gregory (2014) found middle managers tend to experience feelings of being overwhelmed.

In addition to experiencing a demanding job, assistant superintendents also experienced a change in relationships. Kerrie stated, “Your relationships change. You’re almost in an isolated group.” Those relationships they had before were different now. Now, they had to establish lines and boundaries in their relationships. It appeared to the researcher that the female assistant superintendents had to make an instant change with the nature of their relationships. The researcher has also found that this is a lonely position as she can only formulate relationships with understood boundaries and imaginary lines drawn and she is to have only professional conversations with lower level workers. The old days of being in the school lounge discussing school matters have vanished because the role as assistant superintendent no longer allows that degree of relationship comfort. Corresponding with the literature, Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) found administrators have few systems of personal support. Armstrong (2009) found middle space leaders experience loneliness and isolation due to no longer identifying with others the same way as before and middle leaders were no longer part of the same circles.

The researcher found one outlier challenge to sustaining the role of assistant superintendent, which was that the novice female assistant superintendents stated that they missed student interaction. Jasmine stated, “That is the sad thing about this position. I don’t have nearly the interaction that I used to. That was probably one of the hardest things that very first year.” The researcher speculated this was due to the overwhelming duties as assistant superintendent that limited time spent in classrooms. Armstrong (2009) found that administrators experience shocks and surprises when transitioning to



their new middle space leader position. Missing student interaction appeared to be a surprise to the novice female assistant superintendents.

One additional comment the researcher would like to make is most female assistant superintendents in this study did not have aspirations to pursue the superintendency. Contradictory to this study, Brunner and Grogan (2007) found the position of assistant superintendent should create an automatic pool of motivated candidates to aspire to the superintendency. However, four out of six participants in this study did not aspire to the superintendency and thus were comfortable with being second in charge and desired to avoid unwanted demands that are associated with the superintendency. Tessie, Vanessa, Jasmine, and Pearl had no aspirations to achieve the superintendency. When asked whether she aspired the superintendency, Vanessa replied “I actually don’t.” When asked what she saw as challenges to the superintendency, she responded, “The political piece.” Shirley expressed she both desired and did not desire the superintendency whereas Kerrie did aspire to the superintendency. It appeared that assistant superintendents were ambiguous about pursuing the superintendency due to politics, time away from family due to busy schedules, and stress. The researcher has also observed that there is a great deal of politics and stress involved in the superintendency. Brunner and Grogan (2007) found that 60 percent of assistant superintendents had no desire for the superintendency. Brunner and Grogan (2007) further found that assistant superintendents did not aspire due to politics and stress. Leach (2009) asserted the superintendent’s schedule minimizes family time. Hunter (2013) added family responsibilities were a main factor why assistant superintendents did

not aspire to the superintendency. Table 15 summarizes the cross case themes of research question 1B.

Table 15

*Summary of Cross Case Themes for Challenges Sustaining Their Position*

Theme	Novice Female Assistant Superintendents	Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents
Opinions Respected but Not Acted Upon	Tessie answered, "If he [superintendent] says, 'No, we're going to go a different route,' I say, 'Okay, that works for me.' I mean, it doesn't have to be my way."	Kerrie proclaimed, "Yes, there have been some that have not been accepted and you have to understand the process...you may not like it but then in the end he is my superior and I will support what he has recommended."
Limited in Final Decision Making	Tessie asserted, "Sometimes it's challenging only because in a middle space position like this, you're hesitant sometimes to make a decision."	Kerrie stated, "Well, the final decision is his [superintendent's] and if I don't feel like I have the authority to make that decision, I'm going to take it to him."
Demanding Job	Vanessa insisted, "Like I said I'm constantly given additional duties, but is that demanding? Of course."	Shirley responded, "I think it can be demanding. There's so many moving pieces."
Change in Relationships	Jasmine replied, "Those interpersonal relationships change somewhat."	Pearl divulged, "Probably the fact that it's a lonely position... In this position, you either talk to the superintendent or the other deputy."

**Research Question Two: Facilitating Factors**

**RQ 2A: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents**

**describe assisted them in obtaining their positions?** Five themes emerged as facilitating factors that assisted female assistant superintendents in obtaining the assistant superintendency. First, they revealed they were prepared by education and experience.

When asked what facilitating factors helped her obtain the assistant superintendent position, Shirley provided, “I think experience. I think education.” All six participants reflected on their experiences as a facilitating factor in obtaining their position. In fact, five of six participants shared they had been a principal at some point prior to becoming assistant superintendent. Jasmine was the only participant who was a counselor and psychometrist prior to becoming assistant superintendent. According to Hunter (2013), assistant superintendents had been coordinators, directors, principals, and assistant principals before securing the assistant superintendency.

In addition to having obtained education and experience, the female assistant superintendents were promoted from within. Prior to becoming assistant superintendent, all participants divulged they already knew the organization, held positions in the district, and their work ethic was known. Years worked in the district ranged from 12 to 47 years. Jasmine shared, “Having been here [in the district] for quite a while and developing those relationships helped a great deal.” According to Eby et al. (2007), career functions prepare mentees for career advancement while learning the job. The researcher contemplated that by already having positions in the district, they had formed pertinent relationships that helped them secure the assistant superintendency.

Furthermore, the female assistant superintendents disclosed they received mentoring as a facilitating factor to obtaining the assistant superintendency. All participants attributed their involvement in mentoring relationships with the guidance and confidence needed to advance in their careers. Kerrie stated, “It provided me confidence.” McGee (2010) proclaimed mentoring provides guidance and confidence and Zachary and Fischler (2009) espoused that mentoring provides learning

opportunities. The participants noted that their mentors constantly served as teachers who helped build their confidence.

Mentoring was a benefit in various ways obtaining their position. Mentoring provided them with encouragement and confidence to apply for the assistant superintendency. Pearl divulged that her mentor provided her with encouragement and confidence stating “he encouraged me to go on and put in for the job; he was the one who said, ‘You’re as qualified; if you don’t put in you’ll never have an opportunity.’” Mentoring also provided them with guidance, support, and assistance on how to maneuver in their new career paths. Shirley shared, “There’s always someone you can go to.” Pearl added, “It provided which way to step or which way to go.” Furthermore, mentoring provided advice, growth, and development in both personal and professional realms to the female assistant superintendents. Reminiscing about mentoring in regards to career advancement, Kerrie offered, “He’s always gave me good advice about career choices.”

Not only did they form mentoring relationships, but they also networked effectively. All six participants stated they knew their hiring superintendent prior to their hire. When asked, would you say that that [relationship with superintendent] is a male relationship that's helped you obtain this position? Shirley responded, “I’d say so.” Brunner and Grogan (2007) asserted that networks were the reason why administrators obtain central office jobs. Tessie, Vanessa, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie all stated they knew their hiring superintendent while they were principals and believed that helped them obtain the assistant superintendency. Both Jasmine and Shirley shared they also

knew their hiring superintendents as their high school principals when they were high school students.

Besides networking effectively, the assistant superintendents also cited embracing career change as a facilitating factor in obtaining the assistant superintendency. All six participants declared they were ready for career advancement. Pearl acknowledged her male supervisor helped her see she was ready for change and she embraced it stating, “At the time, that position was a challenge.” Pearl commented, “He [male supervisor] was the one who said, ‘Look, you’re as qualified, if not more than most of these folks. If you don’t put in, you’ll never have an opportunity.’” Sherman et al. (2008) posited relationships provide encouragement needed to apply for jobs.

The researcher found three outliers regarding facilitating factors in obtaining the assistant superintendency. Only the novice female assistant superintendents shared they were groomed for advancement. Vanessa divulged, “When I was a teacher, she [former assistant superintendent] would actually have me doing things that I would say, ‘Why are you asking me to do that?’ She just kept saying, ‘I see you here.’” Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared similar experiences regarding their former assistant superintendents engaging in a teacher-student relationship with them. The researcher suspected that they were being groomed into inheriting their positions. McGee (2010) professed the existence of “an invisible network whereby older professionals groom” (p. 14) younger individuals into leadership roles.

Next, only the novice female assistant superintendents revealed they trusted their informal mentor. Tessie reported, “We have a very good relationship, trusting relationship.” Vanessa shared a similar statement when she elaborated on being able to

trust her informal mentors. Eby et al. (2007) asserted that mentoring relationships are based on trust as they can be “compared to counselor-client and spiritual advisor-follower relationships” (p. 14).

Lastly, only the veteran female assistant superintendents declared they participated in direct leadership experience. Kerrie revealed, “I had leadership experience at my school, but I didn’t have the title.” It appeared their mentors worked with them on a voluntary basis to help them learn leadership skills needed to advance their careers which also helped prepare them for job promotions. According to Zachary and Fischler (2009), mentors provide learning opportunities and experiences to help improve leadership skills.

The researcher has gauged from her own experience that these factors also helped her obtain the assistant superintendency. The researcher believed that by working within the district, others, especially superintendents and assistant superintendents, noticed potential candidates to be promoted to assistant superintendent positions. Furthermore, the researcher maintained prior administrative experience is the most valuable preparation for the assistant superintendency as one learns how to deal with people, handle complaints, manage staff, and build relationships. Table 16 recapitulates the cross case themes of research question 2A.

Table 16

*Summary of Cross Case Themes for Facilitating Factors Obtaining Their Position*

Theme	Novice Female Assistant Superintendents	Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents
Prepared by Education and Experience	Vanessa emphasized, “I think education is a portion of it [and] being a principal prepared me for this job.”	Pearl stated, “The answer to the degree is yes [and] I think being principal is probably the best preparation.”
Promoted Within	Jasmine posited, “Having been here [in the district] for quite a while and developing those relationships with people.”	Shirley expressed, “I already pretty well knew the organization having come through it through high school.”
Received Mentoring	Tessie espoused, “I think this is an indirect reason why I obtained this position.”	Kerrie revealed, “It [mentoring] provided me confidence.”
Networked Effectively	Vanessa reported, “She [the superintendent] was the director over professional development, and before that she was an executive director, so she knew my work [ethic] because she worked with principals.”	When asked do you think that relationship with him [superintendent] helped you obtain this position, Kerrie responded, “Oh absolutely.”
Embraced Career Change	Tessie divulged, “I want to be in a spot where I can impact as many students as possible.”	Shirley explained, “I was ready for something different, a different challenge.”

**RQ 2B: What facilitating factors do female assistant superintendents**

**describe assisted them in sustaining their positions?** Three findings emerged as facilitating factors female assistant superintendents described assisted them in sustaining the assistant superintendency. First, they revealed they acquired skills to include planning, utilizing time management, listening, multi-tasking, prioritizing, delegating, having a positive attitude, being trustworthy, and forming relationships. Female assistant superintendents divulged their ability to listen was a skill that they needed to sustain their job. Vanessa stated, “I listen to what everybody has to say that’s involved in the situation

and then I use discernment to make the best decision.” Additionally, Vanessa, Jasmine, Shirley, and Kerrie disclosed their ability to plan was an important skill needed to sustain their jobs. Tessie, Vanessa, Pearl, Shirley, and Kerrie revealed their ability to be trustworthy was also a skill needed to sustain their roles as assistant superintendents. The researcher believed by acquiring these skills, female assistant superintendents are able to gain full understanding of the best way to address issues, solve problems, and possibly prevent future problems.

In addition to acquiring skills, female assistant superintendents emphasized they maintained positive relationships. Vanessa asserted, “Every relationship I can make helps me in this role.” Findings reflected that all assistant superintendents depended on relationships and engaged in positive relationships to sustain their positions. Realizing the importance of relationships, they all shared pertinent relationships that have enabled them to be able to sustain their positions. Those pertinent relationships consisted of relationships with peers and colleagues, upper management, lower level workers, and mentors. The assistant superintendents shared their relationships with peers and colleagues included one in which helpful information was shared in regards to best practices, networking with colleagues in other districts to learn new ideas, increasing awareness of where potential problems are in the local schools, brainstorming with colleagues on how to handle district issues, and as a way to gather input before drawing conclusions. The assistant superintendents relied on their relationships with peers and colleagues. Reminiscing her relationships with peers and colleagues, Jasmine shared, “When you do get to a point where you need a different viewpoint, having those numbers in your phone that you can call is wonderful.” In regards to the importance of the



mentoring relationships, novice female assistant superintendents discussed their relationships with their mentors whereas veteran female assistant superintendents discussed their mentoring relationships in which they mentor others. Describing the importance of the relationship with her mentor, Tessie revealed, "You got to have it." Describing her relationship mentoring others, Kerrie shared, "I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis." Uytterhoeven (1989) posited middle managers must rely on relationships to get the job done.

In addition to acquiring skills and maintaining positive relationships, female assistant superintendents divulged they were involved in networking. Discussing her mentor providing networking opportunities, Tessie reported, "So he's [superintendent] been very good to put me out there to network." Recalling the relationship of networking to succeeding as assistant superintendent, Pearl declared, "If you don't build relationships and networks, you can't survive." They shared the networking opportunities provided valuable insight as to what others were doing and kept them abreast of new ideas. Shirley posited, "Just from an efficiency standpoint, you want to talk to people about what they're doing and how they're doing it." Also, it provided opportunities for collaboration on what others are doing in their districts. Vanessa emphasized, "Collaboration among people is something I depend on." Discussing the necessity of networking with peers and colleagues, Kerrie asserted, "We can't avoid it." Networking also provides opportunities for professional development. Pearl expressed, "You have to go to professional activities to stay attuned. You have to know the world is changing." Sharing the value of networking at a professional conference, Tessie explained, "I got ideas on how we could make our program more successful, how I could challenge and

support my teachers with professional learning.” Disclosing there is no limit to the amount of professional development she receives, Kerrie shared, “I participate in a lot of professional development.” Networking also provides opportunities to be a member of professional organizations. Pearl uttered, “Those professional organizations give you current trends and current things that are happening.” In fact, Eby et al. (2007) posited networking is an opportunity for growth.

The researcher discovered three outliers when analyzing the data in regards to facilitating factors female assistant superintendents described assisted them in sustaining their position. First, only novice female assistant superintendents disclosed they valued mentoring. Tessie contended, “You got to have it in my opinion whether it’s informal or formal. I don’t know everything. I just think that if you don’t have some folks that you can depend on to give you honest opinions to reel you in when you’re off course, I think it would be hard to succeed at this.” Novices believed mentoring provided support, guidance, and assistance.

Additionally, veteran female assistant superintendents revealed they were committed to mentoring others. In fact, all veteran assistant superintendents shared they were mentoring others. Kerrie declared, “I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis. When someone replies, ‘Oh yea I understand that now.’ I feel like if I can provide that then I am providing mentoring on a daily basis.” All veteran assistant superintendents felt they provided support, guidance, and assistance to principals. Mentoring gave them opportunities to share their knowledge with principals to ensure their understanding and success. Armstrong (2005) provided middle space leaders must be able to inspire others.

In addition to being committed to mentoring others, veteran female assistant superintendents also divulged they were fulfilled through their work. Kerrie stated, “I enjoy what I do.” Brunner and Grogan (2007) found assistant superintendents were content with their jobs. Veteran female assistant superintendents maintained they had a positive impact on the district’s success. They felt fulfilled when principals succeeded.

The researcher has discovered from her own experience as a middle space leader that possessing acquired skills was vital to her success. She has realized, too, that listening is a skill that can lead to improved communication with upper management, parents, staff, and students. In her own role as female assistant superintendent, the researcher has realized that planning and her ability to be trustworthy are also vital skills as they have helped her sustain her job as well. Also, the researcher presumed that maintaining positive relationships were needed to sustain their role as assistant superintendent as this encouraged others to discuss any issues with them and promoted a level of comfort needed to maintain continued open lines of communication. Table 17 compiles the cross case themes of research question 2B.

Table 17

*Summary of Cross Case Themes for Facilitating Factors Sustaining Their Position*

Theme	Novice Female Assistant Superintendents	Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents
Acquired Skills	Vanessa stated, "I listen to what everybody has to say that's involved in the situation and then I use discernment to make the best decision."	Pearl exclaimed, "To be a good listener. You've got to listen to people and do more listening than you do talking."
Maintained Positive Relationships	Vanessa insisted, "Every relationship I can make helps me in this role."	Shirley proclaimed, "You have to have good working relationships with all levels of administration, teachers, students, community members. They're all important."
Involved in Networking	Tessie shared, "So he's [superintendent] been very good to put me out there to network."	Kerrie posited, "We network we can't avoid it we don't want to avoid it you have to have the assurance on some decisions that you're making the right decisions."

**Research Question Three: Lived Experiences as a Middle Space Leader**

Research question three asks how do female assistant superintendents describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space? Seven findings were revealed from the data regarding how female assistant superintendents described their experiences as middle space leaders. First, they described they all shared the same location in the organization. Tessie reported, "We have a superintendent who obviously is CEO of the organization and then I would be second in command in the organization." All assistant superintendents worked below the superintendent. They worked between the superintendent and the lower level workers. They answered to the superintendent in charge. Armstrong (2009) proclaimed that in the middle space, the middle manager is caught in middle space between senior management and lower level workers.

Next, the female assistant superintendents purported they had the same function as middle space leaders as they act both as managers and system integrators. In regards to functioning as a manager, Tessie proclaimed, “My primary responsibilities are curriculum and instruction.” Acting as a system integrator, Jasmine stated, “The superintendent has something the principals may not love the idea of. You’re the ear and then the coercer in getting them to get on board with it.” All female assistant superintendents functioned as managers as they were responsible for their specific area or areas and as system integrators as they worked in their middle spaces to keep things balanced between the superintendent and principals. Oshry (1994) asserted middle managers have two functions in which they function as managers overseeing specific areas and as system integrators networking with peers and colleagues to keep things in perspective and balanced with upper management and lower level workers.

Besides acknowledging their location and function to describe their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space, their revelations matched the tasks in middle space that the literature stated. The female assistant superintendents shared that they acted as subordinates by taking orders, superiors by giving orders, equals by acting as a peer or colleague, and a delegator and doer by both assigning and completing tasks. Acting as a subordinate, Vanessa stated, “Yes, I take orders every day.” Uytendhoeven (1989) expressed middle managers act as subordinates by taking orders, superiors by giving orders, equals by acting as peers and colleagues, and delegators and doers by also being a coach and player.

In addition to addressing the same tasks, they divulged they have the same roles in middle space as the literature stated. The roles consisted of them being a bridger,

buffer, and boundary spanner. As a bridger, the female assistant superintendents connected upper management with lower level workers, whereas as a buffer they served as a protector of the organization, preventing any uproars in the organization. Additionally, as a boundary spanner they searched for information and data to improve the organization. In regards to being a boundary spanner, Jasmine voiced, “Getting ideas as to what other systems do that we may be able to use or vary a little bit to work for our students so yes, I do that a great deal.” Honig (2008) purported that boundary spanners find and collect information and data to use within the school system to help improve the organization.

Not only do female assistant superintendents share the same roles, they also revealed they partook in the same relationships as those found in the literature. They engaged in relationships with peers and colleagues, lower level workers, mentors, and shared leadership with upper management. Vanessa expressed, “The relationships that I’ve had with people have all helped me fulfill the role of this position.” Female assistant superintendents did not hesitate to maintain relationships to share information with peers and colleagues and relied on relationships to network. Relationships with lower level workers were important as they provided guidance, support, and assistance to principals. Female assistant superintendents expressed their relationships with principals were important as they were liaisons between the principals and superintendent. Uytterhoeven (1989) mentioned middle managers must rely on relationships to get the job done.

Additionally, female assistant superintendents divulged they experienced the same passages while describing their experiences as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space. All female assistant superintendents passed through

“entry-exit, immersion-emersion, disintegration-reintegration, and transformation-re-stabilization” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 63). During entry-exit, assistant superintendents prepared to transition into the new role of being in middle space while exiting out their previous role. All assistant superintendents believed their education and experience prepared them for transitioning into the assistant superintendency. Vanessa stated, “Being a principal prepared me for this job.” During immersion-emersion, assistant superintendents realized the shocks and surprises being immersed in middle space without having any prior training. Tessie stated, “The biggest shock the biggest surprise for me was the personnel.” Armstrong (2009) purported entry-exit represents entering middle space leadership while simultaneously exiting the prior profession whereby immersion-emersion centers on the shocks and surprises of entering the new role.

Furthermore, during disintegration-reintegration, female assistant superintendents discovered new ways to act in the new role that would lead to succeeding in the middle space. Vanessa stated, “Changing some of these relationships people who I served with as principals with we couldn’t have that same communication.” Lastly, during transformation-re-stabilization, feelings of competence and confidence were experienced as a result of learning new approaches to problem-solving and decision-making as well as realizing the importance of reflection. The ability to reflect is advantageous as it allows for growth, improved decision making, and enhanced confidence. Shirley stated, “I know my job. I know it well and think I perform it well. That gives you confidence in what you’re doing” and Tessie added, “Reflection is so important. It’s the key to growing.” Tessie explained, “If you don’t think through and reflect over what you’ve done, decisions, you’re doomed to either make the same mistakes again or follow a process

that's not very successful." Jasmine expressed, "If you don't look back and think of different ways to handle it, I don't see how you can grow from it. We cannot fixate on the past decisions. We can grow from them and improve but we cannot keep beating each other up over poor decisions." Similarly, Kerrie revealed, "You learn from mistakes. I need to reflect and have that feedback that I am confident that things were right." Armstrong (2009) posited while in the disintegration-reintegration phase, middle space leaders experience changing relationships as their new role requires them to no longer be in the same social circles of people whereas in the transformation-re-stabilization phase, middle space leaders now have increased competence and confidence.

In addition to the passages, middle space leaders voiced that they experienced challenges as middle space leaders in sustaining their positions in the middle space. These challenges consisted of experiencing vertical or lateral pressure. Describing the pressure she experienced, Vanessa stated, "Sometimes the pressure comes because I am the middle man. Being in that middle space, sometimes, is a very hard place to be in." Oshry (1993) purported vertical pressure is the result of pressure between their managers and work groups, lateral pressure results from pressure working between a liaison and customers, and vertical/lateral pressure is a combination of both.

The researcher knew from her experience as a middle space leader that middle space leaders do work in a location between the superintendent and lower level workers. She has realized that functioning both as a manager and system integrator is part of being a middle space leader. The researcher also experienced shocks and surprises when working as a middle space leader from the Central Office level as she now helps the superintendent govern the whole district. The researcher knew that shocks and surprises



were inevitable as this is a position that female assistant superintendents have never experienced prior to becoming assistant superintendents. The researcher speculated shocks and surprises can be minimized by offering more professional development or training programs preparing others for this middle space leadership position. Table 18 outlines the cross case themes of research question 3.

Table 18

*Summary of Cross Case Themes for Female Assistant Superintendent Experiences as Middle Space Leaders*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Novice Female Assistant Superintendents</b>	<b>Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents</b>
<b>Location</b>	Tessie stated, “We have a superintendent and then, I would be second in command in the organization.”	Shirley revealed, “I’m number two behind the superintendent.”
<b>Function</b>	Tessie proclaimed, “My primary responsibilities are curriculum and instruction.”	Kerrie voiced, “I am the director of federal programs, technology, curriculum, administrators.”
<b>Tasks</b>	Vanessa stated, “Yes, I take orders every day.”	Shirley offered, “There are times that the superintendent may issue a directive.”
<b>Roles</b>	Jasmine disclosed, “Getting ideas as to what other systems do that we may be able to use or vary a little bit to work for our students so yes, I do that a great deal.”	Shirley portrayed, “I start looking outside of the district; I’m looking at what the trends are.”
<b>Relationships</b>	Vanessa expressed, “The relationships that I’ve had with people have all helped me fulfill the role of this position.”	Pearl insisted, “If you don’t build relationships, you can’t survive.”
<b>Passages</b>	Tessie added, “Reflection is so important. It’s the key to growing.”	Kerrie emphasized, “I need to reflect and have that feedback that I am confident and that things were right and that we did the best we could.”
<b>Challenges</b>	Vanessa reported, “Sometimes the pressure comes because I am the middle man. Being in that middle space, sometimes, is a very hard place to be in.”	Pearl divulged, “You get those pressures every day.”

## **Research Question Four: Differences Between Novice and Veteran Assistant Superintendents' Experience as Middle Space Leaders**

Research question 4 asks are there differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents, and if so, what are the differences? There were differences in the experiences of novice and veteran female assistant superintendents. First, only novice female assistant superintendents shared missing student interaction as a challenge sustaining their position. Jasmine disclosed, "That is the sad thing about this position. I don't have nearly the interaction that I used to. That was probably one of the hardest things that very first year." The researcher speculated that this was due to the overwhelming duties as assistant superintendent that limited time spent in classrooms. Armstrong (2009) posited that administrators experience shocks and surprises when transitioning to their new middle space leader position.

Not only did novice assistant superintendents share lack of student interaction as a challenge, but also only novices revealed that they were groomed for advancement as a facilitating factor that assisted them in obtaining their position. Vanessa divulged, "When I was a teacher, she [former assistant superintendent] would actually have me doing things that I would say, 'Why are you asking me do that?' She just kept saying, 'I see you here.'" Tessie, Vanessa, and Jasmine all shared similar experiences regarding their former assistant superintendents engaging in a mentor-mentee relationship with them. The researcher contemplated that they were being groomed into inheriting their positions. McGee (2010) found the existence of "an invisible network whereby older professionals groom" (p. 14) younger individuals into leadership roles.

In addition to novice female assistant superintendents being groomed for advancement, only novice female assistant superintendents reported having informal mentors as a facilitating factor that assisted them in obtaining their position. Tessie stated, “We have a very good relationship, trusting relationship.” Vanessa made a similar statement when she elaborated on being able to trust her informal mentors. Eby et al. (2007) noted that mentoring relationships are trusting relationships as they can be “compared to counselor-client and spiritual advisor-follower relationships” (p. 14).

Furthermore, only veteran female assistant superintendents declared they participated in direct leadership experience as a facilitating factor in obtaining their position. Kerrie confirmed, “I had leadership experience at my school, but I didn’t have the title.” It appeared their mentors worked with them on a voluntary basis to help them learn leadership skills needed to advance their careers which also helped prepare them for job promotions. According to Zachary and Fischler (2009), mentors provide learning opportunities and experiences to help improve leadership skills.

Also, novice female assistant superintendents contended they valued mentoring as a facilitating factor that assisted them in sustaining their position. Tessie explained, “You got to have it, in my opinion, whether it’s informal or formal. I don’t know everything.” Novices believed mentoring provided support, guidance, and assistance.

Additionally, veteran female assistant superintendents divulged they were committed to mentoring others as a facilitating factor in sustaining their position. Kerrie stated, “I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis. When someone replies, ‘Oh yea I understand that now.’ I feel like if I can provide that then I am providing mentoring on a daily basis.” All veteran assistant superintendents felt they

provided support, guidance, and assistance to principals. Mentoring gave them opportunities to share their knowledge with principals to ensure their understanding and success. Armstrong (2005) provided middle space leaders must be able to inspire others.

Lastly, only veteran female assistant superintendents declared they were fulfilled through work as a facilitative factor in sustaining their position. Kerrie stated, “I enjoy what I do. I want to make a difference.” Brunner and Grogan (2007) found assistant superintendents were content with their jobs. Veteran female assistant superintendents felt they had a positive impact on the district’s success. They felt fulfilled when principals succeeded. The differences in the novice and veteran female assistant superintendents’ responses were very minor but mentoring was the chief difference that the researcher found to be noteworthy. The novice female assistant superintendents mentioned they were being mentored while the veteran female assistant superintendents mentioned they served as mentors. Table 19 summarizes the cross case themes of differences between novice and female assistant superintendents of research question 4.

Table 19

*Summary of Differences in Experiences between Novice and Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents*

<b>Themes of Differences in Experiences</b>	<b>Novice Female Assistant Superintendents</b>	<b>Veteran Female Assistant Superintendents</b>
Only novice female assistant superintendents acknowledged missing student interaction as a challenge sustaining their position.	Jasmine stated, “That is the sad thing about this position. I don’t have nearly the interaction that I used to. That was probably one of the hardest things that very first year.”	
Only novice female assistant superintendents disclosed they were groomed for advancement as a facilitating factor that assisted them in obtaining their position.	Vanessa divulged, “When I was a teacher, she [former assistant superintendent] would actually have me doing things that I would say, ‘Why are you asking me do that?’ She just kept saying, ‘I see you here.’”	
Only novice female assistant superintendents shared they trusted their informal mentors as a facilitating factor that assisted them in obtaining their position.	Tessie reported, “We have a very good relationship, trusting relationship.”	
Only novice female assistant superintendents affirmed they valued mentoring as a facilitating factor that assisted them in sustaining their position.	Tessie explained, “You got to have it in my opinion whether it’s informal or formal. I don’t know everything. I just think that if you don’t have some folks that you can depend on to give you honest opinions to reel you in when you’re off course, I think it would be hard to succeed at this.”	
Only veteran female assistant superintendents revealed they participated in direct leadership experience as a facilitating factor in obtaining their position.		Kerrie confirmed, “I had leadership experience at my school, but I didn’t have the title.”
Only veteran female assistant superintendents divulged they were committed to mentoring others as a facilitating factor in sustaining their position.		Kerrie revealed, “I feel like I mentor my administrators on a day to day basis. When someone replies, ‘Oh yea I understand that now.’ I feel like if I can provide that then I am providing mentoring on a daily basis.”
Only veteran female assistant superintendents declared they were fulfilled through work as a facilitative factor in sustaining their position.		Kerrie emphasized, “I enjoy what I do. I want to make a difference.”

## **Conceptual Framework Revisited: Middle Space Leadership**

Middle space leadership was the conceptual framework for this study. Female assistant superintendent experiences as middle space leaders working in middle space leadership was the focus for this study. The researcher expected to reveal the following middle space leadership characteristics: location (Armstrong, 2009; Clegg & McAuley, 2005), tasks (Boomgaarden, 2008; Uytterhoeven, 1989), roles (Busher et al., 2001; Uytterhoeven, 1989), relationships (Busher et al., 2007; Cawthorne, 2010), passages (Armstrong, 2009), and challenges (Oshry, 1993), and each of those characteristics were affirmed in this study. All six female assistant superintendents who were interviewed shared their experiences that reflected the characteristics of middle space leadership.

All female assistant superintendents shared they worked in a location between the superintendent and lower level workers. Describing where her position was located in the organization, Tessie explained how she is second in charge right below the superintendent. Additionally, all female assistant superintendents revealed they had four tasks in which they acted as a subordinate, superior, equal, and delegator and doer. Explaining how she acted as a subordinate, Vanessa divulged she acted as a subordinate daily by taking orders. Moreover, the female assistant superintendents have roles that consist of being a bridger, buffer, and boundary spanner. Identifying how she was a boundary spanner, Pearl posited she sought information for improving the organization both within and outside the organization. Furthermore, the female assistant superintendents purported their experiences with key relationships with peers and colleagues, upper management, lower level workers, and mentoring relationships. Revealing her experiences with key relationships with others, Shirley posited productive

working relationships with everyone she came in contact with were important to her survival as a middle space leader.

In addition to revealing their experiences with location, tasks, roles, and relationships, the female assistant superintendents also described the “passages” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 1) they experienced as they transitioned into the assistant superintendency. Describing the importance of reflection in the transformation-re-stabilization passage (Armstrong, 2009), Jasmine insisted that reflection enabled her to grow. Besides discussing their passages, the female assistant superintendents also revealed experiences that reflected they experienced challenges. Reflecting on her challenges, Kerrie disclosed she experienced lateral pressure, sharing the unpleasant nature of these challenges. These findings confirmed the research literature on middle space leadership in regards to location, tasks, roles, relationships, passages, and challenges. However, the findings also supported the research literature relating to the function of middle space leaders both as managers and system integrators (Oshry, 1994). All female assistant superintendents shared their experiences as managers and integrators. Describing managing her areas, Tessie referred to her responsibilities to oversee curriculum and instruction. Figure 3 shows the revised framework and depicts a visual image of findings from this study which aligned with the research literature. The finalized seven characteristics of middle space leadership that reflected the experiences of the six female assistant superintendents are identified within each hexagon.

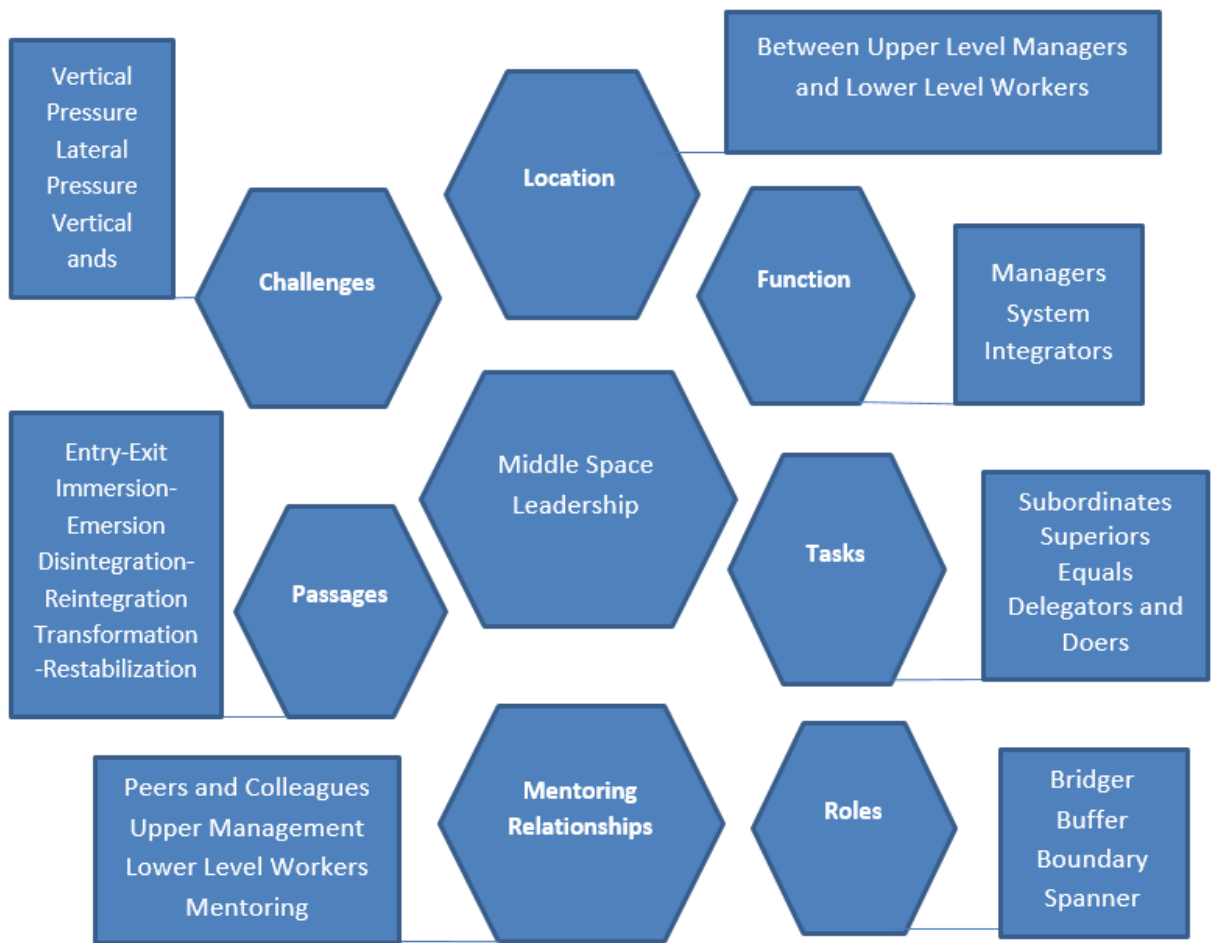


Figure 3. Revised Conceptual Framework

### Limitations of the Study

There were limitations to this study. The findings could not be generalized to a larger population since the study was conducted with six female assistant superintendents in one southeastern state. A larger population would be needed when conducting this study again to make it more generalizable to female assistant superintendents in urban, suburban, and rural school districts. Also, the researcher had to guard against researcher bias since she was also a female assistant superintendent; therefore, she attempted to bracket her experiences. Furthermore, the researcher could not guarantee participants



shared the entirety of their experiences, and each participant's context was different, accounting for variation in their experiences. Lastly, although participants stated there were no challenges, this was unique to the study. Participants possibly revealed 'no challenges' because they all had been "tapped" by their superintendents to move into the role. This likely does happen in many school districts, but there are likely just as many school districts which hire from without, and in those cases, women are in competition with men and other women for those highly sought-after positions. In those competitive cases, challenges would be present. The researcher speculates that women may often apply for assistant superintendencies multiple times before landing one. And then, when entering a new position in a new district, additional challenges will likely be present. So, it may have been an anomaly that the participants in this study all stated that they experienced "no challenges."

### **Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study raised awareness of the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders and revealed whether those experiences were different for novice and veteran assistant superintendents. This study added to the existing literature on assistant superintendents. Implications exist on the benefits of this research to others. Implications exist for school districts, superintendents, female assistant superintendents, and future female assistant superintendents. School districts can utilize this study by using it to justify providing assistant superintendents with supports such as mentoring and networking needed to sustain the assistant superintendency. By reading this study, superintendents can use this study to understand the level of support needed to help ensure the success of female

assistant superintendents. Additionally, by female assistant superintendents reading this study, they may be able to identify with some of the experiences revealed in this study and feel some relief knowing they are not alone in their experiences. By reading this study, future assistant superintendents may be able to gauge how to obtain the assistant superintendency as well as how to sustain the position. Future female assistant superintendents will know which supports are vital to obtaining and sustaining this middle space leader position.

Using multiple case study, the researcher has provided an overview of middle space leadership in regards to female assistant superintendents as middle space leaders. Female assistant superintendents who worked in urban, suburban, and rural school settings shared their experiences. The study's limitations were acknowledged and the need for future research is needed to make the study more generalizable. To make the study more generalizable, the study could be conducted again across a larger sample of urban, suburban, and rural school settings and the study's findings could be compared to this study's findings. One of the characteristics of middle space leadership was that middle space leaders enter passages when transitioning to the assistant superintendency. Further research needs to be conducted with assistant superintendents as middle space leaders to further analyze their experiences as they transition into the assistant superintendency meanwhile entering the passages. Another recommendation for further research consists of conducting a study of male assistant superintendents to see if these findings can be generalizable to male assistant superintendents as well. Lastly, a mixed methods study of male and female assistant superintendents can be conducted to determine the challenges of obtaining the assistant superintendency and the perspectives

of using their middle space leader voice to make decisions. A survey could be sent to a large number of assistant superintendents, both male and female, in addition to conducting interviews.

### **Overall Significance**

This study will raise awareness of the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. Currently, there is little research on female assistant superintendents or middle management in school districts. Few studies exist on female assistant superintendents' experiences in obtaining and sustaining their positions. Middle space in regards to the corporate organization was researched by Oshry (1993) whereas middle space leadership in education was first researched by Armstrong (2009). This study will contribute to emerging literature on assistant superintendents as middle space leaders. When the researcher conducted a Google Scholar search and a search of Auburn University databases for the combined terms of middle space leadership and assistant and/or female assistant superintendents, assistant and/or female assistant superintendents and middle space leaders, and assistant and/or female assistant superintendents and middle space leadership, the searches yielded no results. This study will add to the scant literature in this area.

### **Conclusion**

Female assistant superintendents work as middle managers in middle space leadership. The experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders is an area that has little research and this study will augment that. This study has great importance as female assistant

superintendents are considered in positions next in charge to the superintendency as they work in local education agencies' central offices. The experiences of female assistant superintendents obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders were shared from the perspectives of both novice and veteran female assistant superintendents. The researcher believes this study has contributed to a more in depth understanding of the common experiences of female assistant superintendents in middle space leadership.

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Appendix A  
IRB Informed Consent

The Auburn University Institutional  
Review Board has approved this  
Document for use from  
11/07/2016 to 11/06/2017  
Protocol # 16-375 EP 1611

# Auburn University

Auburn University, Alabama 36849-5221

Educational Foundations  
Leadership and Technology  
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## INFORMED CONSENT for a Research Study entitled

“Female Assistant Superintendents in Middle Space Leadership: A Multiple Case Study”

(Note: Do not sign this document unless an IRB approval stamp with current dates has been applied to this document.)

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore the experiences of female assistant superintendents in obtaining and sustaining their positions as middle space leaders. The study is being conducted by Christie Armstrong, under the direction of Dr. Linda Searby, Associate Professor in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. You are invited to participate because you are a female assistant superintendent and are age 19 or older.

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. Your total time commitment will be approximately one hour.

If you participate in this study, you can expect to answer questions regarding your experiences obtaining and sustaining your position as a middle space leader. There is a risk and discomfort associated with this study. However, this will be protected as best as possible with assurances and safeguards put in place to assure confidentiality and to protect the identifiable information of participants and their schools and documents (use of pseudonyms of the participants and their schools and documents). Since the study requires interviewing very few people, discussing assistant superintendents with school districts could indirectly identify individuals. There is a potential for breach of confidentiality related to the recording of interviews as interviews will be audio-recorded. In regards to the audio-recording of the interview, the recording is for transcription only and the recordings will be destroyed once the transcriptions are verified or no later than June 1, 2017, whichever is appropriate for completing my study. To protect the identity of the school districts and participants, pseudonyms will be assigned following the interview and during the transcription. The researcher will keep a master code list of pseudonyms matched with actual participant names in the event that a participant decides to withdraw from the study and the transcript needs to be destroyed. The master list will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. Because participation is voluntary, participants may choose not to respond to questions that make them uncomfortable, or they may choose to withdraw from participation. Pseudonyms for the participants and their school districts will be used in the dissertation and any subsequent presentations or publications to maintain

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confidentiality and to protect the identifiable information of participants and their schools and documents. The latest date that identifying information will be destroyed is June 1, 2017.

Also, your participation will help lead to the development of a framework of middle space leadership for females in assistant superintendent positions.

There will be no costs to you if you choose to participate in this study.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University or your respective school system.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by not connecting any personally identifiable information with your name. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting, etc.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Christie Armstrong at [cwa0006@auburn.edu](mailto:cwa0006@auburn.edu) or 334-268-0269 or Dr. Linda Searby at [ljs0007@auburn.edu](mailto:ljs0007@auburn.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at [IRBadmin@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBadmin@auburn.edu) or [IRBChair@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBChair@auburn.edu).

Having read the information provided, you must decide whether or not you wish to participate in this research study. Your signature indicates your willingness to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Obtaining Consent      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

The Auburn University Institutional  
Review Board has approved this  
Document for use from  
11/07/2016 to 11/06/2017  
Protocol # 16-375 EP 1611

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