

NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH:
WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A Dissertation
by
SCARLET ANN DAVIS

Submitted to the Graduate School
Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

December 2010
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH:
WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A Dissertation
By
SCARLET ANN DAVIS
December 2010

APPROVED BY:

Ken Jenkins, Ed.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

Sandra Tonnsen, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Sara Zimmerman, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Jim Killacky, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee
Director, Doctoral Program

Edelma D. Huntley, Ph.D.
Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

Copyright by Scarlet Ann Davis 2010

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH: WOMEN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA (August 2010)

Scarlet Ann Davis, B.A., Wake Forest University

M.A., Appalachian State University

Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Dr. Ken D. Jenkins

Women dominate the ranks of teaching, yet men continue to dominate the executive leadership position in public schools, that of superintendent. Fewer than 20% of the public school superintendencies in the nation are held by women. In North Carolina, women hold only 15% of the 117 public school superintendent positions. This study investigated barriers women superintendents in North Carolina encountered in securing the position as well as successful strategies they employed to navigate around the barriers. Resilience and perseverance capacity was investigated as well as career pathways.

Data in this descriptive study were collected via an online survey and from follow-up interviews. Findings from the study revealed conflicting demands of career and family, lack of ability to relocate due to personal commitments, and the belief by others that women must be better qualified than men as significant barriers. Successful strategies for attaining the superintendency were identified as obtaining a doctorate, developing a strong self concept, obtaining family support, learning coping skills to balance demands of career and family, strategically preparing for and broadening district-level experience, increasing flexibility to

relocate, and pursuing opportunities for advancement within the organizational structure. The career pathways that led to the superintendency for the participants in this study were complex and multi-directional. The great majority of the participants entered the superintendency from an assistant or associate superintendent position and were in the 40-49 year old range when they secured their first superintendent position.

All of the women superintendents who participated in this study exhibited high levels of resilience and perseverance. Not only did they reveal resilience and perseverance through the data collected by the survey instrument and the interview protocol, their resumes and professional vitae verified their broad and extensive experiences and commitments to long-term goals by achievement of credentials and attainment of multiple leadership positions.

Four themes surfaced from the qualitative data obtained in this study. They were *purpose, perseverance, people, and passion*. Each of the participants used these themes to navigate circuitous paths through a labyrinth of multiple and mysterious routes often lined with obstacles to eventually conclude at the inner circle of executive leadership.